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“Art After War: 1948-1969” in the Philippines

BY DARRYL WEE | JANUARY 12, 2016

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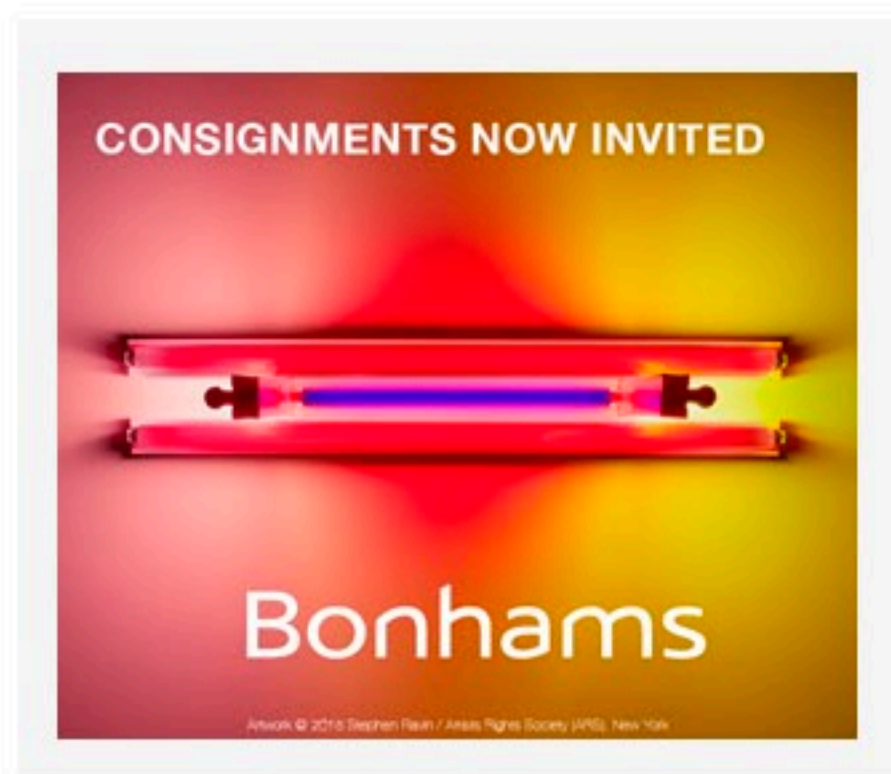
Alfonso Ossorio, *The Last Judgement (Angry Christ)*, 1950
(Courtesy the artist and The Modern Reader)

Philippine contemporary art is on the rise. Next month, the fourth edition of Art Fair Philippines returns to downtown Makati, Manila, for an exuberant showcase of the best of the local art scene that has seen visitor numbers balloon from just 6,000 to 16,000 over the space of three years.

And come March, Art Dubai will invite Manila-based curator Ringo Bunoan to present a special showcase at the fair's Marker program that will spotlight the dynamism of the Philippine capital's manifold, independent art scene — the first such showcase of the country at any major international art fair.



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Given all this rising market interest in Philippine art, have critical and scholarly pursuits on the subject kept pace? A newly released volume, with more than 200 full-color images of artworks and some 50 key artists discussed, hopes to pick up the slack.

Art After War: 1948-1969, the first book in a planned series called “Philippine Artscape” that hopes to delve deeper and with more critical rigor into key periods of 20th century Philippine art history, is a newly released

volume by [The Modern Reader](#), a publishing imprint of Strathmore Management Inc., which focuses on lavishly produced books on art, culture, and lifestyle.

The Modern Reader’s founder, Olivia Yao, recently spoke with BLOUIN ARTINFO to discuss the scope of her ambitious new enterprise, the uniqueness of contemporary Philippine art, and future projects in the pipeline.

Do you see *Art After War: 1948-1969* as the first, pioneering endeavor of its kind? What have been some of the obstacles that have prevented modern Philippine art history from being properly documented and written about?

Olivia Yao: *Art After War: 1948-1969* is the first part of a series of books called Philippine Artscape, which attempts to sketch out the contours of the history of art making in the country from the twentieth century onwards. It is an encompassing view of the most significant artworks produced in the country, which will be made up of several volumes — the most comprehensive yet to be published about Philippine art in the contemporary era.

Some of the challenges that we faced in putting this book together had to do with finding images and locating the works. Our book is not only confined to paintings and sculptures, but also prints, photography, architecture, and comics, so we had to gain access to the works from various sectors.

How did you go about assembling the team of writers, historians, and other experts for this first volume?

Like any other business, putting a team together requires a lot of preliminary research into who the best people in specific fields are, meeting them to see if what they would like to do is in line with our objectives, and assessing if we can work well together.

The team responsible for *Art after War* is composed of highly regarded individuals from their respective fields. Patrick Flores, the noted art historian and curator of the Vargas Museum, as well as the Philippine Pavilion at last year’s Venice Biennale, wrote the text.

The photographs were shot by At Maculangan, who is widely known for his works in the arts and culture sections of several high-end magazines and books. The layout of the book was designed by the award-winning book designer, Felix Mago Miguel.

What are some of the dominant themes that emerge from this period of Philippine art following the end of World War II?

This volume covers the period immediately after the Pacific War until the glorious era of the Sixties. Some of the important themes covered are the rise of the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP), the conception of the so-called “13 Moderns,” and the involvement and prominence of the Philippine Art Gallery in Manila.

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The history of Philippine art is rather unique in Asia, given its complex history of successive colonialisms, a rich artistic heritage both imported and vernacular, and mix of both Catholic faith and native animism. How do you think Philippine art stands in relation to that of its regional Asian neighbors?

We are unique because we had to interact with three successive colonial governments, and at the same time, sustain our living traditions.

How did you come to be interested in contemporary art, and art publishing in particular after having had a successful career in the banking industry?

I bid adieu to my corporate life of 22 years in 2014. After many years in banking, I reached a stage where I was ready for a change. I used to spend a good part of my life around art, art friends, artists, and galleries, so I guess it didn't quite come as a surprise that one of the things I would get involved in after banking would be the arts.

I had a difficult time navigating the art world when I started collecting. In a way, it was the lack of good books on Philippine art that motivated me to start this project. I was warned, though, that publishing an art book would not be an easy endeavor. But I was up for the challenge.

Are you a collector yourself? What kinds of works do you appreciate, and who are some of the younger talents in the Philippine art scene that you think deserve more attention (and why)?

I started collecting art shortly after getting married in 1997, as we needed a painting to decorate our condo. It's a wonderful feeling to see how the need to beautify a wall has evolved into something more precious and meaningful.

I have to admit, though, that I had to significantly scale back my acquisitions since I left the corporate world to give way to the other things that I plan to do.


I enjoy many types of art, often on opposite side of the spectrum. Among the younger artists, I love the works of Maria Taniguchi, Louie Cordero, Leeroy New, and Catalina Africa.

I feel most passionately about these young artists because they have ambition and the unique voice that I believe will continue to break new ground for years to come.

What other titles and projects does The Modern Reader have in the pipeline? How do you envision the Philippine Artscape series taking shape?

We will start work on the next volume after *Art after War* very soon. The timeline for the succeeding books is still tentative, but we are working around the following periods: 1928 to 1947; 1948 to 1969; 1970s; 1983 to 1999; and 2000 until the present.

We are developing ideas for other titles and projects. The market for high-end coffee table books in the Philippines is small for now, but the reception that we've received for *Art after War* is both gratifying and encouraging. We are also timing release of our books, as we continue to develop this market.

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