
Finding Queer Optimism in the Art of Oscar Zalameda

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Abstract

Queer theorists have traditionally advocated for the adoption of an outlook of queer pessimism in order to develop a criticality that helps the queer community effectively address the issues it presently faces. Some queer theorists, however, have instead advocated for an outlook of queer optimism—an outlook which allows space for celebrating joy and embracing optimism without forgoing the criticality needed to fight for queer rights. This paper touches on the validity of having such a disposition even in the dark times we currently live in—specifically how art can move us to embrace queer optimism. In discussing the formal techniques the queer artist Oscar Zalameda employed in his art practice, this paper aims to provide a phenomenological/hermeneutic explication of how he formed affects of queer optimism through his works. These paintings continue to preserve these forces, and our encounters with them in the present give us hope. Considering the political potential of queer optimism amidst the current realities queer persons are facing in the Philippines, it is important to take a critical look at the works of Zalameda and other queer artists embracing such a disposition.

What is it like to live as a queer person in the Philippines? In a 2021 piece by the investigative journalist Corinne Redfern, she notes that there is no “national legislation that would protect LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination in the Philippines” and that “at least 50 transgender or gender non-binary individuals” have been murdered in the country since 2010. She also notes that the number of murdered transwomen is probably higher and that this is because “When a trans woman is murdered, the Philippine National Police (PNP) logs her gender as male (and vice versa for trans men), while . . . the stigma that continues to shadow homosexuality and queer identities often dissuades family members and friends from speaking out.” The Philippines may have a reputation for being “one of the more LGBTQ+-friendly countries in south-east Asia,” but this does not mean it is some sort of queer utopia (Manalastas and Torre 61). It is a country where a president’s “war on drugs” has led to the killings of transgender people who were forced to go into the drug trade because of a lack of opportunities resulting from “discrimination and transphobia” (Redfern). It is also a country where hostile attitudes towards queer persons have been significant enough to be associated with an increased risk of suicide among lesbian, gay, and bisexual Filipino youths (Manalastas, “Sexual Orientation” 9-11; Manalastas, “Suicide Ideation” 113-115).

Despite these distressing realities, queer activism is alive and well in the Philippines. Indeed, “For many members of the Filipino LGBTQ+ community, joining a Pride March every June is almost second nature” (Jaucian). More encouragingly, many of these people know that activism is not just a matter of merely going to a Pride March every year. The militant national democratic LGBTQ+ organization Bahaghari, for one, holds protest rallies against injustices that harm not just members of the queer community, but all the other Filipinos who suffer under the abuses of the state and the ruling class. The group does this as the need arises: in the last decade, it initiated protest actions after the brutal killing of transgender man Ebeng Mayor and after the introduction of a draconian anti-terror bill. Protest actions against the latter led to the arrest of twenty Bahaghari members (Langara; Jaucian), but the group remains undeterred in their fight for a freer Philippines.

However, as the writer Don Jaucian says, while “queer spirit is brighter than ever in each Pride March,” certain members of the queer community unfortunately “only think of Pride as a parade”—a party. They do not want the Pride March to be “political,” either because they do not understand the need to make it so, or worse, because they actually support the existence of an illiberal regime. One might chalk up such tendencies to a misplaced optimism, and one might be correct in this regard. This is because optimism, for all its positive valences, can actually be cruel.

For the queer theorist Lauren Berlant, “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing,” and this desire might involve something as seemingly innocuous as food or something as grand as a political project (1). “Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (2). The desire of some members of the queer community to treat Pride as merely a party and to do away with protests, which address problems such as “contractualization, the rising prices of basic necessities and the privatization of social services to misogyny and the displacement of indigenous peoples” (Casal), is rooted in the fantasy that the queer community can truly be free in a neoliberal-capitalist world they can put their faith in.

Because of such a tendency (among other factors), it is not surprising that some queer theorists have dismissed the political potential of optimism in advancing queer rights, positing that *queer pessimism*, which is “articulated in the field’s attention to negative affect, melancholy, shame, the death drive and shattering,” is the only valid outlook we can have (McCann and Monaghan 228, 236).

Considering that optimism can be cruel and subtly work against the goals of queer causes, does it mean that there really is no place for it in the movement? Although Michael D. Snediker notes that there is an “antagonism between optimism and knowledge” that

“cozens liberals (queer and nonqueer) into complacency,” he asserts that optimism can be built on a foundation of “emphatic responsiveness” and a “solicitation of rigorous thinking”—he calls this “*Queer Optimism*” (1-3). Snediker explains that

Queer optimism, immanently rather than futurally oriented, does not entail predisposition in the way that conventional optimism entails predisposition. It presents a critical field and asks that this field be taken seriously. Even as my investigation extends, at certain junctures, to the likes of happiness, this is not because if one were more queerly optimistic, one necessarily would feel happier. Queer optimism doesn’t aspire toward happiness, but instead finds happiness *interesting*. Queer optimism, in this sense, can be considered a form of meta-optimism: it wants to *think* about feeling good, to make disparate aspects of feeling good thinkable. *Queer Optimism*, then, seeks to take positive affects as serious and interesting sites of critical investigation. (3)

Indeed, the 2019 Metro Manila Pride March was an example of an event that wholeheartedly embraced queer optimism by providing a platform for militant protest whilst embracing the possibility of queer joy in the present. It was both a protest and a party. Optimism and happiness need not make us abandon the lofty goals of working towards a better world in the present. We can continue holding on to these things when we embrace queer optimism, which respects the ideal of happiness while moving us to work towards a better society in the here and now, not just for our own community, but for all the other marginalized sectors of society.

Optimistic Affects

One thing that separates art from science and philosophy, at least according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is that it is partly made up of affects. More specifically, Deleuze and Guattari define art as “*a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*” that is “preserved in itself” (620, 634-636). But what exactly are affects? Deleuze and Guattari are of the view that “affect is not the passage from one lived state to another but man’s nonhuman becoming” (625). Affect has also been described as “feelings, emotions, or subjectivities,” as “separate or distinct from reason or rationality,” that “shape how we come to understand the world” (Klages 200). We can also say that

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. (Gregg and Seigworth 1)

No matter how one defines affect, what we can all agree on is that our encounters with it can effect a change in us—it has the capacity to transform us in ways big and small.

When we talk about queer optimism in art, we are dealing with works that “introduce epistemologies not of pain, but of pleasure; aestheticize not the abdication of personhood, but its sustenance” (Snediker 41). All of these are involved in the formation of the affect of queer optimism that we can find in a piece of art. Through an encounter with a work that preserves such an affect, we are moved to develop feelings of queer optimism. We may even, in turn, end up carrying the affect and then spreading it in the environments we inhabit through our actions, thus changing their emotional atmosphere.

Artworks should not be treated with suspicion for simply embodying an optimistic affect. This is what should be the case. Still, it is important that a piece of queer art *specifically* embodies the affect of queer optimism. If a work of art embodies cruel optimism or some other questionable variant of optimism instead, we are justified in being suspicious of the work as the affect it preserves could be a negative influence on anyone who encounters it—the affect may become an infection that turns them into someone who is complacent about the status quo.

Two specific examples of art embodying the affect of queer optimism—Hart Crane’s poetry and Sean Baker’s film *Tangerine*—can illustrate its operation.

Following Snediker, Hart Crane’s poetry exhibits queer optimism through “the proliferation . . . of the figure of the smile” in it.

Snediker adds that “More vexing than any one of these smiles is their mysterious, collective force as a serial trope. ...The collective force of these incessantly iterated smiles is matched by the force of even a single smile’s given instance, in that many of these smiles . . . are explicitly associated with the petrifications and resistances of stone” (36). Crane describes smiles with adjectives such as “unyielding” and “unmangled,” and Snediker suggests that it is through this that Crane “conjures a personal will that yields or doesn’t yield, a body that has survived some violence unmangled (and simultaneously, the bodies that have not)” (36-37). All of these add up to a “poetic optimism” which Crane consciously embraced (37). Snediker tells us that because Crane was known for his alcoholism in life and died by suicide, the poet was “uniquely available . . . to pessimistic readings” (36). But notwithstanding these aspects of his life, Crane wrote poetry that celebrates queerness and which gives us a more hopeful disposition. His poetry can therefore be read through an optimistic lens.

In the case of *Tangerine*, Andreas Stoehr writes that the film “doesn’t merely center a pair of black trans women as its protagonists, it lets them be funny, too.” Indeed, Stoehr also writes that

Baker and co-writer Chris Bergoch weren’t bent on teaching an inspirational lesson or making a statement. They just tell a set of tartly funny stories with on-the-fly fleetness, emphasized by the iPhone-shot street photography. It’s worlds away from the staid likes of *Dallas Buyers Club*, and while neither Rodriguez nor Taylor appear likely to net any Oscars for it, *Tangerine* is right in a vanguard of movies starting to shake up a transphobic status quo.

Unlike queer films which focus on death and suffering, *Tangerine* presents a comedy. It does not ignore the stark realities affecting transwomen—in one scene towards the end of the film, urine gets thrown at the character Sin-Dee’s face and transphobic slurs are hurled at her—but at its heart, *Tangerine* shows us that the queer experience does not have to end in tragedy or sadness and that there is always room for hope. For this reason, it is a perfect example of a film embodying queer optimism.

Who Is Oscar Zalameda?

Queer optimism can also be found in Philippine art—it can be encountered in Emiliana Kampilan’s comic *Dead Balagtas Tomo 1: Mga Sayaw ng Dagat at Lupa*, for one. In the two stories focusing on queer couples coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds and religions, one sees the possibility of living a dignified life as a queer person in the Philippines. But while *Dead Balagtas* is very much a great work of art that is worthy of serious academic study, for this paper, I would like to concentrate on the works of another artist that has recently helped me cope with the political realities of our country—the art of the queer painter Oscar Zalameda.

Born in Quezon Province in 1930, Zalameda earned a bachelor’s in fine arts from the University of Santo Tomas before pursuing further studies at the Art Students League of California, the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, and Paris-Sorbonne University (Pilar). The artist also ended up “studying mural techniques under Diego Rivera” (“De Zalameda and Quezon’s Festive Artistry”). Zalameda lived a very eccentric life before dying in a state of relative obscurity in 2010. Upon the artist’s death, one writer for a newspaper wrote that

As his remains were brought to the cemetery, where the family mausoleum that he built for his parents awaited him, a dark and tumultuous sky wept, as though expressing not just sympathy, but that something was wrong or amiss. It was, after all, the final procession of the cosmopolitan artist who, upon his return from his highly successful European sojourn in the mid-1960s, wowed his countrymen and, in turn, was wined, dined and feted by the crème de la crème. This was the burial of an important man, the toast of society from the late 1960s all the way to the 1970s. But where was everyone?” (Silvestre)

The writer tells us that in stark contrast to the scene of his funeral, Zalameda, decades before his death—during the height of his hedonism—went about befriending and partying with the wealthy and fashionable, adopting an aristocratic air and speaking with a Parisian accent when dealing with them. He called everyone

"Dahlin" and often said "I just arrived" as if he had just come from "Beirut or Paris or one of those capitals" when in reality, he just came from "his apartment or Lucban"—such behavior, believe it or not, fooled socialites into thinking that he was born into high society (Silvestre). A friend of Zalameda's told the writer that "When someone in the press shortened his middle family name, Deveza, to De, he intentionally did not ask that it be corrected. 'It fit him to be called De Zalameda because he behaved like an aristocrat in public.'" Considering his personality (and the formal excellence of his art), it makes sense that he was the favorite portraitist of Manila high society. Indeed, it is an unfortunate fact that Zalameda became a favorite portraitist of Imelda Marcos, who in 1966 invited him to hold a one-man show at Malacañang ("De Zalameda and Quezon's Festive Artistry"; Lerma; Silvestre). This connection to Imelda is a very ironic fact for me because Zalameda's art has helped me cope with the recent, very much undeserved win of her son Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in the presidential election. But as the cultural theorist Mieke Bal says, the paintings left to us by artists from earlier times have an "ongoing vitality" that enables them to speak to issues we face in the present, where "the participation of the contemporary viewer in the construction of the meaning of age-old images is relevant for a sense of history as, simply put, *change over time*" (Bal, Reading Rembrandt v). The way works from earlier times speak to the conditions of the present may be surprising because they can be radically different from the way they spoke to the conditions of the times they were made in. Also, while Zalameda might have enjoyed the patronage of the Marcoses, the images he left us (at least those that will be discussed in this paper) do not glorify them and indeed contain certain truths about queer life that provoke us to feel a sort of critical joy. Whatever personal affections Zalameda may have had in relation to the Marcoses, the affects we find in his art are quite removed from the former. For all of these reasons, Zalameda's works have the unintended effect of helping us cope with the current political situation we are facing.

To put things in perspective, affects are not the same thing as affections; the affects produced by an artist do not necessarily have to correspond with whatever affections they may have. As Deleuze and Guattari say, "By means of the material, the aim of art is to

wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations" (622). Affects are autonomous—"they go beyond affections" (Deleuze and Guattari 622). An artist may even be able to invent "unknown or unrecognized affects . . . that are all the more imposing as they are poor in affections" (Deleuze and Guattari 625). And so while Zalameda's lived affections cannot be separated from his bourgeois decadence and his problematic relationship with the ruling class, the affects he formed in his art need not necessarily be connected to these and can even have a liberating effect. This is actually the same reason why monstrous men are able to create works of utmost empathy, and this is why such works can continue to affect us positively even as we stop celebrating the artists behind them. It is valid to criticize Zalameda's involvement with the Marcoses, but it is also valid to continue gaining strength from his work. We can still encounter the affect of queer optimism in his art despite the questionable facets of the life he lived. This is the nature of affects: they work outside the realm of rationality and, again, are autonomous.

When one compares the art of Zalameda to the art of Kampilan, one easily sees how the latter is a lot more progressive in character. Indeed, the two queer stories in Kampilan's graphic novel combine a national democratic orientation with an outlook of queer optimism. Still, it cannot be denied that Zalameda's art holds the same affect (if nothing else), and so it cannot be denied that it also functions in a way that promotes queer liberation, even if not on the level that Kampilan's art may work on.

Before we move on to dissecting his art, it bears mentioning here that the contradictions I have just laid out are not the only ones we see in the story of Zalameda's life. For one, although a socialite has said that Zalameda was "fun" and that "his presence was refreshing and never boring," the artist was also given to "occasional moods or histrionics." It has even been said that in the artist's "melancholy moments . . . he painted in gray" (Silvestre). Perhaps we can connect this pessimistic side of Zalameda's to the "stabbing incident" involving him and the fashion designer Pitoy

Moreno, an incident which marked the beginning of Zalameda's retreat from high society (Sioson). Zalameda later on suffered a stroke and retreated to Lucban, Quezon, where he was laid to rest, away from the eyes of his former friends (Pilar; Silvestre). His family, who, along with fellow townsmen, were the recipients of Zalameda's generosity (the artist "set up a foundation underwriting the schooling of many students in his hometown"), and his partner, the recipient of a love that could kill (if one were to believe the rumors surrounding the stabbing incident, that is) and which lasted until death, were by his side at the end of his life (Silvestre; "De Zalameda and Quezon's Festive Artistry").

Painting Time and Joy

Like other artists, Zalameda employed different styles of making art throughout his life. This paper will only concentrate on his cubistic paintings as they are the ones that most strongly embody the affect of queer optimism. Zalameda's cubistic paintings, unlike those of Vicente Manansala's, H.R. Ocampo's, and Cesar Legaspi's, do not aspire towards a severity that forces itself upon the viewer. Rather, they are breezy, and the best of them employ such exuberant colors and bold geometric shapes smartly placed in the background to produce the highest formal pleasures in the viewer. On the other hand, just like the other cubistic paintings produced by Philippine painters in the 20th century, Zalameda's works also channel the structure of Philippine folk art through the use of its characteristic rhythms. Ricarte Puruganan, one of the Thirteen Moderns, posited that paintings channel the structure of Philippine folk art produce a "dynamic rhythm" that impresses a sense of motion on the viewer (Fernandez 16). But even as his art shares this character with the art of the three aforementioned neo-realists, Zalameda's treatment of motion differs from theirs in one important respect: the use of elongated planes and bold straight lines we often see in the background of his paintings makes us see *the movement of time*, and somewhat paradoxically, we see it as something that has been frozen in his works. Even in landscapes that do not feature the colorful people which populate his paintings and only show static scenes, the artist's characteristic use of abstract geometric forms makes us see the movement of time frozen in a single moment.

Why am I focusing on how Zalameda uses formal techniques to depict temporal motion? What does it have to do with the affect of queer optimism? To begin with, it is through this element of the artist's works that we are given a sense of present-ness, and this present-ness is the site of queer optimism. As Snediker says, queer optimism "is not promissory. It doesn't ask that some future time make good on its own hopes. Rather, *Queer Optimism* asks that optimism, embedded in its own immanent present, might be interesting" (2).

But how exactly does the depiction of frozen temporal motion orient us towards the present? To understand this, we first need to go back to the idea of the "pregnant moment." It has been argued that "since a painting can only depict one single moment in time, such a select moment must be chosen very carefully so that the implied potential of the entire action can be seen in a nutshell. The painter must think of the most pregnant moment without giving away too much and thereby restricting the imagination" (Allert 112). More specifically, "the observer must see *more* in the work of art than what is given in the fruitful or pregnant moment it presents" (116; emphasis mine). What this means is that when a painter captures the pregnant moment, they "represent a single moment, but one that can only be understood as following the past and announcing the future" (Bal, *Narratology* 179). A perfect example of a painting capturing the pregnant moment is American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's *Whaam!* (1963):

The left-hand canvas features an American fighter plane firing a missile into the right-hand canvas and hitting an approaching enemy plane; above the American plane, the words of the pilot appear in a yellow bubble: 'I PRESSED THE FIRE CONTROL... AND AHEAD OF ME ROCKETS BLAZED THROUGH THE SKY...'. The outline of the resulting explosion emanates in yellow, red and white; the work's onomatopoeic title, 'WHAAM!', jags diagonally upwards to the left from the fireball in yellow, as if in visual response to the words of the pilot. The painting is rendered in the formal tradition of machine-printed comic strips – thick black lines enclosing areas of primary colour and lettering, with uniform areas of Ben-Day dots, purple for the shading on the main fighter plane and blue for the background of the sky (Goodwin).

The scene depicted in the painting is a frozen moment that lets the viewer imagine the rest of the story, from beginning to end. And because the pregnant moment moves the imagination to stretch towards these two opposite poles, the viewer's consciousness is also oriented towards both the past and the future—this, even as one is viewing the immediate present of the painting's scene.

Unlike Lichtenstein, who consciously tried to embrace the pregnant moment in his art, Zalameda laid out the entire history of a specific moment in a single scene. Through the use of the characteristic bold, dynamic bands that permeate the backdrop of his genre scenes, Zalameda's cubistic paintings present both an abstract accounting of the movements that led to the figural scene presented in it and an abstract accounting of the movements that will spring from it. We do not exactly see the concrete particulars of these movements. We do not see the fishermen in Zalameda's *Manginisda* settling on the shore and leaving with the day's catch. Rather, what we feel we see in the vibrantly colored dynamic bands that surround them are the abstract essences of the presented moment's past and future. By making us feel that we are already in contact with the moment's past and future through the use of their signifiers (the rhythmic bands), *Manginisda* and the other cubistic paintings made by Zalameda keep us oriented to the present. This is the inverse of what happens when we view a painting such as Lichtenstein's *Whaam!*, which captures the pregnant moment.

Zalameda's use of bands to evoke a specific sense of temporality can be compared to Barnett Newman's use of "zips" in his paintings. As the art historian Claude Cernuschi writes, these zips mark "significant moments in the stream of time" (116). In the case of Newman's *Onement I*, "in line with the time-as-moving-object metaphor, the central stripe will stand for the spectator existing in the present, with the left and right halves of the painting as signifying the past and future, respectively" (116). Indeed, "canvases such as *Onement*, by virtue of the beam's central placement, and their strict adherence to bilateral symmetry, compel us to focus on the center zip as a visual analog for a human presence in the 'now'" (117). The difference between Zalameda and Newman is that the former used his bands as backdrops for

Philippine genre scenes—the presence of human figures frozen in a single instant has the effect of making Zalameda’s jewel bands embody the past, present, and future, rather than just act as markers that separate temporalities.

Of course, the present is merely the site of queer optimism. Zalameda’s use of formal abstraction to situate us in the here and now is not enough to make us encounter such an affect. It is entirely possible to encounter queer pessimism in a painting that orients us to our immediate experience. So how exactly do Zalameda’s paintings form the affect of queer optimism? I would argue that the affect primarily derives from the artist’s stylish use of jewel tones.

Whether he was painting genre scenes depicting rural life and labor or instances of middle-class leisure such as two men playing tennis—whether he was painting people having sex, even—Zalameda made use of emeralds, rubies, and other vibrant gemstone colors in all sorts of combinations to make us feel the joy of everyday life.

Just as Hart Crane was able to evoke queer optimism with his use of the figure of the smile, the simple use of jewel tones was enough for Zalameda to evoke the same kind of feeling.

¹ I do not have the rights to the images of the Zalameda paintings I would have liked to show in this paper. The good news is that they can be found online. The reader can view them by visiting the following webpages:

Mangingisda - <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Mangingisda/C88C41CEf8D8C635>

Compositional Boats - <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Compositional-Boats/561D8B5DEBC24CD9>

Fisherman - <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Fisherman/873F63D72BA8DA53>

Untitled - <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Untitled/14D5CF4DBBD61EFF>

Flower Vendors - http://www.artnet.com/artists/oscar-zalameda/flower-vendors-Mb7w_qlarvcLoix3B7_m_w2

To further illuminate this phenomenon, we should refer to a passage Eugenie Brinkema wrote in *The Forms of the Affects*, a book where she argues that “affects have structured forms and that form has an affective intensity that must be read for”:

Gaudere (to rejoice) is that from which we also derive *gaud* (a grammatical doublet for joy), gaudy, and jewels or ornaments, for it was gaudies, the beads on the rosary, through which a joy not tethered to the Earth, a mysterious joy of the Joyful Mysteries of the Virgin, took place. Cognates in Romance languages (such as *joya* in Spanish) also mean “jewel,” precious stone, and in diminutive forms a valuable trinket; *gioja* in Italian is both a jewel and joy or mirth. [This] link to ornament and bead also sutures joy to other forms of surface and artifice . . . joy is simultaneously marked by its intimacy with faceted gems, angled objects that reflect light, break it down into its constituent parts (what is valued in a diamond is precisely this working-over of light, its treasured and cultivated dispersion, scintillation, and brilliance) . . . joy’s merriment hovers in the pleasure or gladness in the glittering surface of *things*. The light-reflecting/refracting qualities of joy bind it to the material objects of the world, the specific, certain, and concrete, the jewel that reflects and breaks up light, but also to the bibelot, the bauble or the trinket, to a gaud, a ribbon, a dead flower—something. (243, 252)

The forms we see in the paintings of Zalameda, with their jewel tones, simulate the operation of gemstones on our affective perception. Because of what Brinkema posits as the “intimacy” between the affect of joy and jewels, any person may be infected with the former when they look at the artist’s paintings. And in line with this, I also believe it is the case that the Filipino queer, whether consciously or not, knows that the particular way Zalameda uses jewel tones is rooted in a queer way of seeing—this enables the Filipino queer to open themselves up to the affect of queer optimism that Zalameda’s paintings embody. Although this might seem like an odd claim, it has to be noted that even the museum studies scholar Victoria Mills says that “The gem functions as a way of thinking about queer visibility” (147). In fact, she even asserts that the “collecting of jewels suggests a way of ‘seeing things differently’” and that the “ocular perspective on the gem constructs non-conventional forms of male identity” (149). Indeed, Mills writes that authors such as Joris Karl Huysmans and

Oscar Wilde used the idea of collecting gems in their works to foreground *queer ways of seeing* (149-150), and even more interestingly, Huysmans believed that the symbolist painter Gustave Moreau was able to make “dreams visible” in his works by borrowing from, among other things, the art of jewelry (qtd. in Mills 157).

Manansala, Ocampo, and Legaspi all made cubistic paintings full of vibrant colors, but in comparing their bodies of work with Zalameda’s, one sees that the queer painter’s use of color is far removed from theirs. He openly showed us the way he saw the world—his phenomenal experience of it—through the rendering of Filipino life in a queer gaiety of hues. Through the use of jewel tones, he gave a formally astute camp aesthetic to the realities we often see portrayed in Philippine paintings. Philippine genre scenes that embody a camp aesthetic—an aesthetic intimate with feelings of celebratory transgression—could only easily resonate with the Filipino queer’s way of seeing. If Gustave Moreau was able to enchant us through the gemlike sheen of *Salome Dancing before Herod*, then Oscar Zalameda made his dream of queer optimism visible to queer eyes through the bejeweled radiance of his wonderful paintings. Even if Zalameda’s evocation of queer optimism did not lean on an outspoken celebration of the queer experience or explicit homoerotic imagery, it nevertheless has a fine sprightliness that makes the affects it contains palpable to the beholder of his art.

The things I have said in this section were the result of my phenomenological/hermeneutic reading of Oscar Zalameda’s paintings. It might be possible to do a much more critical reading of his works, and it would be interesting to see other scholars try to give more negative takes on the artist’s oeuvre. For as much as I would like to indulge readers who expect a more critical engagement with Zalameda’s art, my lived experience prevents me from doing so. To force myself to give a harsher take on the artist’s work would only result in a reading that is simply *untruthful*. Also, as much I would like to include the history of the reception of the artists’ works among other members of the queer community, the fact of the matter is that Oscar Zalameda is one of those artists that have long been neglected by art scholars/writers. To the best of my

knowledge, this is actually the first scholarly paper to deal with Zalameda's work that comes from the perspective of a queer scholar. And sadly, art writers from outside the academe have also not dealt with the queer reception of the artist's paintings. Still, through my reading of Zalameda's art, I hope that I was still able to reveal important truths that will prove useful not just to the queer community, but to everyone else who desires freedom in some form or another.

The New Society Restored

Less than a month ago, we saw the restoration of the Marcoses with the electoral win of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. I had hoped the nightmare that was the past six years would end already, but unless Marcos Jr. is ousted, it will be here to stay; it will simply continue to affect everyone living in the country, especially those belonging to marginalized sectors. I can only imagine what harm the coming administration will inflict on those who are both queer and poor, those who are oppressed in more ways than one.

But while things may seem dire and hopeless, I do not feel sad at all. I am still very much angry, but I do not feel as sad as when Rodrigo Duterte was elected president. I believe this is because, for one reason or another, I have developed an outlook of queer optimism. I do not want to wait for the coming of a queer utopia before I can work on being happy. I know that I can still feel joy in today's world, and I know that I do not have to give up caring for the world even if I am happy. Make no mistake, Marcos Jr. will be a terrible president. But this should not make us feel guilty about feeling happy and optimistic in the present. So long as we use these feelings to fuel the drive to emancipate ourselves and others, there is no harm in embracing them.

Of course, I do not want to discount the validity of queer pessimism as an outlook. In a world where "the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace," in a situation that "increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another"—when the spirit of the times is defined by "the attrition of a fantasy, a

collectively invested form of life, the good life”—it is logical to be “skeptical about optimism, at least in its appearance in contemporary regimes of compelled, often-repressive, happiness” (Berlant 5-13). When optimism is weaponized by the state and the ruling class to keep us from seeking accountability (e.g., when the state promotes resilience narratives during times of ecological disaster and when dissent is silenced through the idealization of “unity”), it is only natural—productive, even—to embrace pessimistic affects.

Again, in writing this paper, I did not set out to invalidate queer pessimism. What I aimed to do was to defend the idea of queer optimism. Whichever of the two outlooks one develops, it can be said that they are on the right path—both lead to a critical presentness. It just so happens that in my case, queer optimism was the outlook I had come to develop. I hope that through this essay, I have provided a good argument for the validity of embracing queer optimism even in these dark times. So long as what we are feeling is not a cruel optimism leading to a complacency that works against the goals of the queer community and other marginalized sectors, then there is no problem with feeling optimistic. Indeed, it is through my queer optimism that I am able to think that we do not need to wait another six years to start fixing things. The electoral system is not the only means by which we can effect change. We can fight for our rights as queers and the rights of other oppressed people outside it. And we can do this in the here and now. Let queer optimism inspire direct action and dispel the notion that we can only achieve change through our vote!

A lot of factors led to me adopting an outlook of queer optimism—it would be unfair to say that only one thing was behind it. Still, it has to be noted that the art of Oscar Zalameda, as well as those of the other artists who make use of the affect of queer optimism, helped move me toward this direction. Indeed, perhaps I can say that Zalameda’s generosity did not end with his passing: his generosity is still at work today in the art he left behind, which gives us hope for the present. Today, I see many examples of queer art made by Filipinos that exhibit a similar sensibility and which even overtly embrace more progressive positions. While they are filling the shoes left behind by Zalameda, I hope that we do not

forget that as early as almost half a century ago, one painter was already interested in being queer and happy at the same time.

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