

BATANES' DYNAMIC ART □

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A friend in the travel industry used to say: “There are two kinds of Filipinos — those who have been to Batanes, and those who haven’t.”

I’m inclined to agree, however elitist seems the quip, since hardly one out of 200 Filipinos may have visited our northernmost islands, to augment the 20,000 current residents.

Time still stands still in parts of Batanes. But in Basco, the capital, recent years have seen many new developments that have brought the main island of Batan apace with much of the country. Electricity is now available 24/7. Cellphone and Internet service have become regular privileges. At least three main lodges — Pension Ivatan, Batanes Seaside Lodge, and Batanes Resort — welcome visitors at modest rates, when one used to have to arrange for a homestay program.

Asian Spirit flights are always full, with bookings for the summer months already totally accounted for by early March. The “winter” season of December to February is still the best time to visit, however, to get a feel of the chill factor that suits the remarkable environment with expansive views of rugged country — indeed so much unlike the rest of the archipelago, and more like, say, Tuscany transported to Ireland.



Spectacular hill country, with gentle contours of pasture land dominated by the hulking, mist-covered Mt. Iraya, breathtaking cliffside drives, ocean breakers crashing onto jagged

coast, and you have a panorama of remoteness — but not desolation. In fact it's easy for visitors to conjure parallels of scenery that recall movie settings, from *Wuthering Heights* to *Lord of the Rings*.

February usually features dry if wind-whipped conditions, and some sun. But last weekend was freaky, as it still seems to be all over Luzon. We had half a day of sun, with the rest of a long weekend given over to drizzles and downpours, the wind in a constant howl.

But we would be fortunate, a son and I, as we stumbled into the fortune of a homestay with Batanes' favored son, former Cabinet secretary and former Rep. Florencio "Butch" Abad. I had meant to check out Fundacion Pacita, the studio home of his late lamented sister, the international artist Pacita Abad. I had heard how it had been turned into an art center upon her demise a few years ago.

Sure enough, its A-frame structure of traditional stonewalls was as pretty as a picture, lording it over a grassy promontory that overlooked a coastal sweep and the Pacific Ocean. A hundred meters past a gully that led down to a rocky beach was Butch Abad's own modest cottage and splendid garden. For three days and nights we became unannounced if captivated guests, doubly lucky to be in the company of artist Charlie Rocha and his educator wife Minda.

Charlie was brought to Tukon, the upland barrio of Basco where lies the Abads' ancestral pasture land, to paint certain landmarks around town, as well as to give a lecture to very young artists who are following not only Pacita's footsteps, but those of a dynamic crew of homegrown painters who now help run the Pacita Abad Center for the Arts.

Founded on December 7, 2005, the Jorge and Pacita Abad Memorial Foundation seeks to continue the celebrated native daughter's commitment to preserve the far-flung islands' unique heritage and culture, and to give the children of Batanes the opportunity to appreciate and express themselves through art.

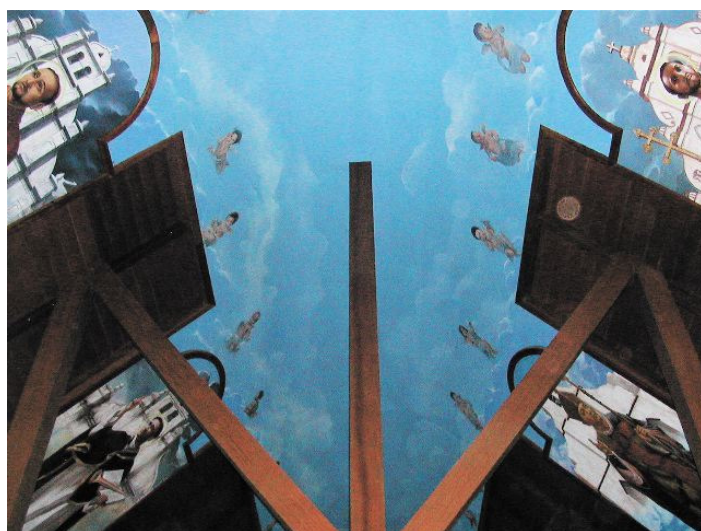


Fundacion Pacita now serves as the headquarters of the Pacita Abad Center for the Arts, which also has a satellite office in the Heritage Center in Basco. Pacita's widower, Jack Garrity, and brother Butch are co-founders and co-chairmen. Funding comes from the sale of Pacita's paintings in the art auctions of Sotheby's, Christie's and Larasati in Singapore, as well as donations from her friends all over the world.

When he's not taken up with the equally dynamic activities of the Black-and-White Movement in Manila, Butch busies himself with an entirely colorful and creative life in Tukon — supervising the addition of more buildings around Fundacion Pacita as well as on his own spread, with an eye towards turning these into residency venues for an art community inclusive of writers, musicians and dancers. He also continues to expand his gardens, and loves nothing better than to have guests plant trees around the lovely property.

Between his cottage, which he himself designed and decorated, with thoroughly Mediterranean influence, and the Fundacion building is a mini plaza with life-size bronze sculpture of their folks, Jorge Sr. and Aurora or "Lolay," seated with their backs to the ocean — a commissioned work by Julie Lluch. On his cottage walls is a burgeoning collection of artworks by artist-friends like Araceli Dans and Manny Baldemor. Batanes landscapes by local artists hang side by side with watercolors of Brittany.

On a lower part of Tukon, by the road to Basco, is another project that manifests the passion for art. The newly built Tukon Chapel features pitched ceilings with a mural series of the six patron saints of Batanes, done by the Fundacion's resident artists, who have formed an association known as Yaru nu Artes Ivatan.



One look at the portraits they've mounted on the ceilings will tell you they are no Sunday painters, but full-fledged artists of the first water. Among the stalwarts are Roland Gonzales, Jaypee Portez, Tere Gordo, Leslie Merida, Javier Ponce, and Xavier Abelador. The last-named also serves as the Fundacion's project coordinator, under executive director Byron Peralta.

To say that they have talent would be a gross understatement. The lifelike paintings of

saints, utilizing native elements and with the town churches serving as backdrops, are so good that Bishop Camillo Gregorio has commissioned the chapel's lead painter, "Olan" Gonzales, to execute a saint's portrait for the Vatican.

Olan, whose mother Irene is a master basket maker, was the first Ivatan to be offered a full scholarship in fine arts at UP Diliman, where his work drew appreciation from such noted artists and professors as Malang, Jerry Tan and Dr. Francisco Datar. He missed his hometown so much, however, that he chose to return without completing his scholarship.

He expresses his passion beautifully: "Whenever I was in Manila, I always wanted to go back home as soon as I could to my native land, Batanes. Now with the help of the Yaru I can see my dreams realized: a circle of Ivatan artists that will paint itself towards the Art World, yet remain rooted in our history and culture. We will show the world the beauty and art of our land, our people and our culture. This way I can repay the life and inspiration that Batanes has given me. I dream of Batanes as a world in balance with man and nature."

Only 19 years old, Jaypee Portez has developed a unique abstract style that emphasizes circles, which represent the eyes of the dibang or flying fish, the staple Ivatan food. The circle also figures prominently in old pottery, he says, as well as native gold earrings and the stones used for Ivatan houses. It has become his signature motif. His works have been purchased as far away as Australia. He has been commissioned to do a mosaic at the Batanes airport, as well as a 50-piece installation in a new hotel in Manila to be put up by restaurateur Ricky Gutierrez of Sentro.

Tere Gordo's colorful style shifts from realism to abstraction. She won 2nd place in the College Level of the Pacita Abad Painting Competition in February 2006, then won the grand prize in 2007, replicating Olan Gonzales' feat the year before.

Xavier Abelador's oils, acrylics and watercolors, mostly of Ivatan houses and landscapes, take a cue from impressionism, yet he also defines the richness of Ivatan culture and tradition in a surreal light. A BFA graduate of FEATI University, he has won national awards: runner-up in ArtPetron 2006, finalist in the Shell Art Competition 2006, and finalist in the PLDT-DPC cover design contests of 2005 and 2006.

The Yaru nu Artes Ivatan also helps run the art training center in Basco, where art supplies and materials are provided Ivatan children who are trained in the basics of drawing, painting, color theory and art appreciation. The program includes a one-week intensive training in mural painting, ongoing studio workshops, and participation in national arts festivals. Over 350 children have graduated from the summer training program. Their works, together with those of the artist-trainers, have been exhibited at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the Museo Pambata, and the Headlands Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Some works are sold on eBay with the help of the Kalinawa Foundation.

On the afternoon that Charlie Rocha gave his impassioned lecture on the need for "a sense of drama" to enhance an artist's basic draftsmanship, some two dozen kids, grade schoolers and high schoolers, sat rapt in attention, their sketchpads and notebooks before them. Around the upper-floor salon were various paintings-in-progress, with every single one giving evidence that they have been learning well from their zealous mentors.

What is it in the rarefied environment that produces so much quality art, from a good number of the youth who are otherwise bereft of outside influence and benefits?

It must be the way their eyes are trained from birth to appreciate the wealth of details in their unique habitat. The way the quality of light changes from season to season, how they are kept indoors for long days, only to emerge and share instantly in the purity of the air and pristine empowerment — all these must contribute to the Ivatan artist's personal worldview.

Of course, Pacita Abad's success on the international stage must also have inspired Ivatans to take up the brush and palette. That they enjoy a strong and proud culture also equips them with the distinctive influences, motifs and thematic concerns that translate into dynamism.

This happy evolution has transpired in the last few years, no doubt helped along by the Fundacion's abiding commitment. One other happenstance was the arrival of US Fulbright scholar Margarita Garcia in 2004. She stayed only for three weeks, but returned in 2006 and took up residence in a lighthouse, which was also soon converted into a studio. Noting the scarcity of canvas, she initiated the lighthouse umbrella project, with children painting over 400 recycled umbrellas with scenes of the natural environment and culture of Batanes.

Her networking skills also led to art exhibits in Manila and abroad. For all her inspirational efforts, she was named vice president for special projects of the Fundacion and Pacita Abad Center for the Arts.

Now, apart from the annual painting competition and art workshops, art scholarships have also been established. Talented youths are provided stipends to cover tuition, books and materials as well as a living allowance and transportation to Manila. Current art scholars are Reynante Cabizon, a Fine Arts major at FEATI University, and Jeremy Dharmasena, a Visual Arts major at the Philippine High School for the Arts.

The Fundacion's executive director, Byron Peralta, has successfully networked with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) for funding for a Batanes art festival. Ivatan artists are also busy with public art projects: murals throughout the islands, a mosaic and art umbrellas on display at the Basco airport, and even school portraits, signage, brochures, and decorative boats. They have proposed to replace the ruined flagpole at Basco Square, and hope to turn the park into an art environment for the enjoyment of Ivatan families.

Such dynamism for remote, rugged islands. It's a glorious development, for such natural grandeur to be paralleled by a people's devotion to culture and art. Indeed, as a Basco road sign proclaims before a view of sea, "Dios mamajes." The Lord rewards the deserving.

Hail Batanes! Hail its dynamic artists!