
Color, Strength and Pride

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By Doreen G. Yu

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TF! Editorial Comment: *Art and artistic expression is an intrinsic part of both culture and education. Bringing art to life is thus an essential element of sustainability. As told in the article below, a balikbayan artist from New York is finding her place in far-off Batanes bringing the arts to life for young people and for the community.*



It's a long, long way from a home on campus in Chicago (where she was born) or an advertising office in New York (where she worked) to a lighthouse in far-off Batan island (which has been home for the last few months), but Margarita Garcia isn't complaining. In fact, she's totally delighted with the arrangements (living in a lighthouse "with a view of the sea out the front door and the ocean out back" is "totally great," she enthuses) and is making plans for a long-term stay in Batanes, the Philippines' northernmost province, as executive director of Fundacion Pacita, a foundation there that will train young artists.

Margarita returned to the Philippines in November last year (she had visited for three weeks in 2004 as part of a New York-based Filipino youth group called Ugnayan ng mga Anak ng Bayan) on a Fulbright grant as an artist and youth educator. After a planned project in the south was deemed too risky, she found herself in the wind-whipped province on the northern tip of the archipelago.

"My project in Batanes is a series of trainings in the visual arts that will hopefully provide young indigenous artists with cultural pride, using visual arts training as a means to alternative livelihood and, most importantly, a sense of possibility," she explains. "I taught 50 youth, ages 8 to 21, in two batches—elementary on Saturdays and high school, college and OSY (out of school youth) on Sundays. I also ran a community photography class on Wednesdays."

The experience, though exhilarating, had its share of challenges, calling for creative innovation that turned out to be a really good thing.

"Since canvas for painting is scarce in the isolated islands of Batanes, we hit on the idea of recycling umbrellas broken by the frequent typhoons by painting them with indigenous designs." The installation of vibrantly painted kites and umbrellas—to show the wind and the rain of Batanes—is one of their most successful art pieces.

That and several murals form part of the exhibit currently on show, until January 31, 2007, at the Museo Pambata (on Roxas Blvd. just off the Luneta) rather confusingly entitled "The Enduring Legacy and Resilience of Indigenous Culture." The exhibit includes works from another project Margarita held at the Kamarikutan Gallery in Puerto Princesa, Palawan, which resulted in a mural celebrating the province's

ecological diversity as well as a collection of colorful painted rainsticks.

The call of the winds and cliffs of the northern province brought Margarita back to Batanes, this time for classes on the island of Itbayat—"the furthest inhabited island in the Philippines, where the runway is still a dirt road and our eight-year-old valedictorian had never tasted bread," she explains.

All together, she trained over 300 Ivatan children and adults throughout Batanes, in Basco and Mahatao towns on Batan island, as well as in Itbayat and Sabtang islands. They painted three murals, over a hundred umbrellas and shot more than 5,000 pictures. Their "graduation" was a grand festival with over 200 people coming from the different towns and islands to see the exhibit, held at the Basco Arts Training Center, which not long ago was an unfinished office where they worked and slept on boards.

The Kalinawa Art Foundation, founded by Canadian David Gilinsky, sponsored a show of artworks by 11 artists on the Internet. From there and on eBay, half of the works were sold to buyers from all over the world. A couple of art directors from the Princess Cruise Lines not only wrote out a check to support the project but promised to help sell the kids' works internationally.

"Our work was also honored by visiting archaeologist David Blundell from the University of California-Berkeley who called our mural 'the most important cultural event in modern Batanes history' as it integrated traditional and modern means of expression, ensuring that indigenous culture is not static, that culture is something that youth are encouraged to interact with and shape according to their own needs," shares Margarita.

Hey, you know how the top shows our legends, the middle our traditions and the bottom our present/future? It looks like we're just reaching for progress without thinking about it and abandoning everything that makes us Ivatans and our traditions. We need to fix that."

That was the assessment of one of the kids who worked on the Basco mural. Says Margarita, "I blinked at them and grinned—widely. You can't teach those realizations, you can only hope that they happen and then help our youth figure out how to balance tradition and progress for themselves."

This former advertising executive (she was senior project manager at Ogilvy and Mather, a worldwide advertising firm) is all praise and admiration for the kids and people of Batanes.

"The talent and dedication of the children from day one was incredible." she says. "The kids would come to the lighthouse at 7 a.m. every weekend to pick me up for class and refuse to leave until it got dark, even if it meant they had to walk ten kilometers home. Artist Olan Gonzales gave up his time to teach without pay. We painted the murals day and night and the community fed us, family style, *kamayan*, on banana leaves. We slept on boards in an unfinished office that would later become our arts training center.

"The Ivatan people are incredibly hospitable and kind. From the smallest child to the oldest person, they make me feel at home in Batanes and grateful to be there. They support the project wholeheartedly, offering whatever they can to help out—from the four volunteers who just became staff members, giving up their weekends and

evenings without pay to help teach and coordinate, to the kids' parents and other community members who fed troupes of youth artists even if we were just eating *dibang* (the local fish, which is delicious) and *kamote* while we were painting the mural, to the guard of the building we were working in who ran errands for us and even took kids home if it was late, to the teenage girls who would come to the lighthouse and help clean up after the kids left."

The projects not only gave the kids a new venue of expression, but gave them the chance to realize their own worth and potentials as citizens, as leaders, as human beings. Margarita tells of a troubled youth who had taken to drinking but, one morning when she came in to the workshop, found a note from him taped on the mural that said, "Gone with kids to make them breakfast."

"If that is my only reward, I'd be happy," she says with a wide grin.

Twelve-year-old Rhodelyn Come and several of her friends, all grade school students, took on leadership roles in the mural project, directing the artists and painting more than 40 percent herself. "They lead each other, speak confidently in three languages—English, Filipino and Ivatan—and take care of the younger ones," Margarita says proudly.

Volunteer Edwin Valientes had made his own film about the fishing traditions of Batanes as part of the photography/film class ("even though I was so busy it was mostly self study... good thing he's a genius," quips Margarita), and his work caught the attention of renowned watercolorist and architect Joven Ignacio, a professor from the University of the Philippines who was one of the art trainers. His film was also picked up by visiting professors from Taiwan and Australia for use in their classes, and former education secretary Butch Abad has pledged to support his dream to get a master's degree.

Margarita also shares the story of Leslie Villegas, an abstract artist, who has been sick for a long time with a hard to diagnose liver condition. "She could not afford any art supplies of her own, so in the *bayanihan* spirit or *payhuhuan* in Ivatan, the other painters all gave her some of their own materials during the 1st annual painting competition sponsored by the Pacita Abad Foundation ... and she went on to win the grand prize for her innovative, modern stand on art. She's still working, and the other artists take care of her and made sure her inspiration was reflected in the mural."

At the center of this explosion of art in the province is the Pacita Abad Center for the Arts, housed in what was the home of the late internationally acclaimed artist on a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The vibrancy and color and energy of her art have found new life in the art of the children of Batanes. At the Fundacion Pacita, the talents and aspirations of the youth of Batanes will be nurtured, guided and urged on by the indefatigable Margarita, who admits that "the Philippines has become home."

An indigenous arts association called Yaru nu Ivatan Artists has been formed, with 25 members and nearly P100,000 in commissions in just its first months. The people of Batanes have rallied behind this whirlwind of artistic endeavor full force, from Governor Vince Gato to Congresswoman Dina Abad to all the mayors, teachers and parents. Whether it is providing funds or facilities, cooking lunch or cleaning up, attending workshop sessions and graduations and exhibits, the project has become a truly province-wide family affair.

"I love Batanes and the people there, especially the kids," says Margarita. "It's like a cultural cradle of the Philippines, with strong traditional culture and a mix of independence—every Ivatan has their own farm and root crops—and toughness: They stand in the face of the storms from the north and are proud. Their art, culture and personality reflects their strength—from a very early age they learn to work hard and be strong."

Strong indeed and proud are the children and youth of Batanes. Visit the exhibit at the Museo Pambata and be amazed at the color, strength and pride in each brushstroke of these wonderful artworks.

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