



## The Met's new guards & the future of Philippine contemporary art

By John A. Magsaysay (The Philippine Star) | Updated February 2, 2013

The sun rises to a new dawn in Philippine contemporary art, in tune with the bells and whistles of our bustling economy. Our thriving artistic identity, it seems, is its new currency.

With names like Ronald Ventura and Winner Jumalon fetching record highs in international art auctions, and seeing the steady incline of young Filipino artists being exported to global art residencies, the new face of Filipino art, it seems, is the must-have mug shot of creative acclaim around the world. But it used to be that the success of our own brand of contemporary art could only be traced by price tags, performances in art auctions, and the privilege of plum gallery representations well outside our shores. Yet, this time, by reviving a cultural landmark, Philippine contemporary art's colorful success has finally found a place to call home.



Custodians of Philippine contemporary art: Acclaimed educator, art publisher, and the Metropolitan Museum of Manila president Tina Colayco and adviser to the Guggenheim Museum on South East Asian art, art scholar Dr. Patrick Flores standing proud amid a powerful display of Filipino contemporary art at the Met's Tall Gallery, for its "Philippine Contemporary: Scaling The Past and the Possible" exhibition opening to the public on Friday, Feb. 8.

The Metropolitan Museum of Manila, once the fortress of pre-colonial fineries and colonial fine art and located at the Bangko Sentral Compound on Roxas Boulevard, has, since 1976, been home to some of the country's most priceless collections of art and artifacts. It had also played host to the most prestigious international exhibitions to ever reach the country, from Picasso to Klee, and retrospectives of such Filipino art heavyweights as Ang Kiukok, Vicente Manansala, Arturo Luz, Fernando Zobel, and Anita Magsaysay-Ho.

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This time, under its revitalized leadership by art publisher and educator Tina Colayco, the Met is given a facelift — a younger, hipper, and timelier visage of Filipino art.

With its launching of the permanent exhibition “The Philippine Contemporary: Scaling the Past and the Possible,” the Met, under the curatorship of Dr. Patrick Flores, professor of Art Studies at the Department of Art Studies and curator of the Vargas Museum at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. Flores is also a notable authoritative figure in Southeast Asian art. The Met presents, in a well-devised chronological display, the evolution of Philippine modern and contemporary art, from Amorsolo to the Aquilizans. Using the metaphors of cartography, Flores maps out the fine distinctions, the differences, the deviations and the similarities of the movements, techniques, and outputs that define our art history’s past century. A breathtaking display of the country’s most notable names in current art finds its space at the lobby’s Tall Gallery, where the substantial collection of seasoned art patron, Paulino Que, will be in proud, poignant display.

Such penchant for the art of the new and upcoming by a museum once only known to showcase the precious and the priceless is indeed an exciting movement in our awakening local art scene, and it is sure to be welcomed by no less than a celebratory fanfare by the country’s cultural elite.

Hosted by Doris Magsaysay Ho, member of the Met’s board of trustees, the Met fundraising gala and annual dinner is set to gather all the well-known donors, art lovers, and collectors in the country in what would be a traditional celebration of Filipino contemporary art and its patronship. Amid the clinging of champagne flutes, the roundabout of cocktails, set against the backdrop of the finest new Filipino art, funds for the vibrant new Met’s future is expected to be well underway, if Manila society’s newest hot-ticket event is of any indication.

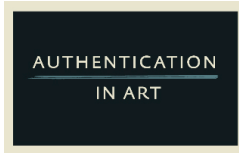
Yet, before the flourish and the festivity, the Philippine STAR got an exclusive peek of the Met’s launching exhibition, which will be opened to the museum-going public on Feb. 8, and an exclusive interview with the Met’s new guards, Tina Colayco and Dr. Patrick Flores.

**PHILIPPINE STAR:** Having been the dean of the UP College of Fine Arts, and currently the president of the Metropolitan Museum, how do you think has the Philippine art scene developed in the past decade, particularly with the younger artists?

**TINA COLAYCO:** I say this every graduation time, that there has never been a more vibrant time for the arts here in the Philippines, the last decade. If you consider the surge of galleries and museums around the country, as well as the curators and institutions who are inviting our young artists around the world for exhibitions, residencies, and participations in very prestigious art events, the growth has just been very substantial. Finally, I would like to say that in the last few years, there have been more opportunities for the arts and the creative field which is very encouraging for many young artists. Of course, the success of some of our artists we are seeing around here, they have been iconic symbols of success undoubtedly for many generations who come after them.

With more and more Filipino contemporary artists earning renown in the art capitals of the world, what do you think is the main selling point of Filipino art in the international market?

**TC:** It has really been remarkable, the rise of the young artists in the international art stage. I think it’s due to a lot of things. Even our curators are being recognized, like Dr. Patrick Flores, our curator for the “Philippine Contemporary” exhibit, sits in the advisory committee of the Guggenheim (Museum) for Southeast Asian Art. We have curators, artists, and galleries who have raised the bar for our art, by participating in different art events in the world. I feel that it’s who they are, and how they are able to express themselves in the global arena. Many of them draw from their individual persona, they also draw a lot from the history of their country, their heritage, so it’s who they are. They are creating an identity that is distinctly Filipino.



Did the success of these young Filipino contemporary artists in the international market spark the revivals of our museums and art institutions in the country? Is it the growing demand that opens new clamor for national art?

TC: I think we have, at this time, a public that is more sophisticated, and at the same time, is looking for a more meaningful engagement with art and culture. They are willing to cultivate a more in-depth experience when they go to museums. I think that is one of the main reasons why a museum, like the Met, wishes to be able to stand for something, so that we are able to say that we are going the route of contemporary art and design for a better understanding of who we are and our art and culture.

The museum experience before, for any Filipino, meant standing in awe of the Lunas, Amorsolos, and Hidalgos, and now we see the Met putting the spotlight on young artists like Winner Jumalon or Leeroy New. Is this the new direction that the Met wishes to take? A younger, bolder route from what the public readily accepts as a “museum experience”?

TC: I'd like to qualify this. We are strengthening our core mission objectives and we are integrating into it a more heightened focus on contemporary art, because we are custodians, too, of the pre-historic gold artifacts, and we are also the custodians of the colonial art collection of Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas. With our new focus, we would like to present them in a way that the contemporary audience would better appreciate and understand. We cannot altogether go one way because we have those collections, so we have to find a way to integrate all of this with the contemporary art acquisitions of the BSP, as well as the loans from our benefactors.

What differentiates the classical Filipino masters with our equally notable contemporary masters? What are the similarities of our classical masters with our contemporary masters?

TC: That's what we want to be able to show in the exhibition of the “Philippine Contemporary.” The masters are there and we want to show that these are the artists that made their mark at various points in Philippine art, that's why they are masters. And we'd also want to show something about the art that came after them, that is why Dr. Flores has this wonderful concept of chronological line to sort of give everyone the context of how this all came to be.

DR. PATRICK FLORES: It's a historical survey from 1915, the Amorsolo period up to the present. So it's almost a century's worth of Philippine art in one exhibition.

With such a monumental display, is it a permanent exhibition?

PF: The site is permanent, but the exhibition is shifting in terms of the cycle of loans from institutions, the artists, and art collectors, but the Met has dedicated the site to modern and contemporary art permanently. It's a tough task to coax our collectors and convince them to part with their pieces for quite awhile, and these paintings will be greatly missed where they were used to be displayed, that's why we can only negotiate for a certain period.

By revitalizing the Met as the country's center for contemporary art, what reforms, adjustments, and changes will your office have to undergo to achieve such a landmark move for Philippine art?

TC: We've only been a year coming into the museum, but let me tell you how we came about our core objectives. The overall vision is that the museum would be the leading museum and resource center for contemporary art design, by Filipinos by foreign and Filipino artists. We would also want to transcend barriers, whether social, economic, geographical, intellectual, because from the very start, the museum had always went with the philosophy of “art for all.”

PF: This was in 1986, after the EDSA Revolution, when there was a shift in focus from international art to art for all.



C: So we are going for that philosophy. Art is really for everyone and we will stick with that, yet, still move on and redefine our directions. We are going to build on three things, one is on the exhibition and educational programs, more on the contemporary direction that we would like to take, which is why we are launching this Feb. 2, Philippine Contemporary art exhibit in the context of the various perspectives that Dr. Flores wishes to bring out in the exhibition. Second, we want to be able to sustain the museum. Many museums here need to build on that, which is why we are working on our relationships with our generous donors and sponsors, as well as our museum partner, the Bangko Sentral. And third, the Met wishes to strengthen and redefine its core objectives, by integrating a heightened focus on the relevance of Philippine Contemporary Art and Design to Filipino and international audiences today.

They say that if there is one good indicator of economic success, it is a thriving art and culture. With our improving economy, do you see more and more patrons or donors being attracted to investing in the arts?

PF: Since there is market interest, there is also consciousness in supporting the arts. There is also some kind of impetus for institutions to cultivate the conditions for contemporary art to flourish. Many institutions have started nurturing their own contemporary art programs, so that's institutional patronage. The other form is, of course, is collecting. We have seen very active set of collectors in the Philippines, like Paulino Que, as well as young ones supporting the primary market and the secondary market both here and abroad. They go to auctions, they go to fairs, and at the same time, they support our local galleries. And another type of support system is the gallery system. It has expanded its spaces, attesting to the demand of contemporary art to be shown properly in wide open spaces. Before they were only seen in small galleries in the malls. We have a growing demand from quite a sophisticated public for contemporary art.

TC: It's a different kind of consciousness now. We have a lot of people who share in the vision of promoting Philippine art and culture through museums, which is why we are having this kind of response, not only from the private sector, but finally from the government. And I think it's a very big thing. What is it that makes you proud with the art that we are creating?

What type of contemporary art is set to be on display at the Met? Is there a distinction, like critical-acclaim, international-renomn, or price range?

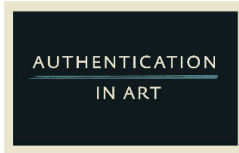
PF: It's a curatorial call to select among the so many actively working today deserves a place in the Met. It is a limited space and we cannot include everyone, and if you do, it's not really a museum. Museums set certain standards. The curatorial task is always about exclusion and inclusion. Part of it is taste of the curator, part of it is institutional validations of the art world, so it's a mix. Then, I weigh the two. Then, thirdly, its significance, the importance of the practice in its particular field.

TC: We really value the role of curators here at the Met. All of our exhibits have curators because we value their expertise, their knowledge, and the perspective they try to bring out in the selection of the pieces that they exhibit, and the very concept of why the collection is put together.

PF: There will be questions raised, I'm sure, and we welcome them. It's fair game. But we are confident with the way we selected, we can defend the process, and we have to live with the outcome.

One of the biggest issues in the Philippine art scene these days is the lack of experts in the field of art authentication, forensics, and appraisers that are well-versed with our local art. Do you think the Met will be able to address these concerns, even if only for contemporary art?

TC: This is our thrust, we want to be able to bring various experts and scholars in their various fields of expertise, and we want to do that through linkages. You can't have somebody really in-house, because we really don't do much authentication. But for purpose of having exhibitions here, we rely on the curators who are very knowledgeable in the material that they are dealing with, also other people from



different institutions. That is why we are strengthening those linkages. There are many Filipinos now who are coming back after working in various museums overseas and they are expressing their willingness to be consultants and lend their expertise to the museum in various ways. So, I believe that we will get there, and the Met aims to provide access to different experts.

Being a publisher of fine art books, an art educator, and a successful museum director, how do you think our society should be educated where art and culture as concerned, and what role do museums, in general, and the Met, in particular, play in achieving this?

TC: We would like to be able to be part of the curriculum change. We would like to bring children here and make it their classroom. We really need the support of corporate sponsors for that, because there really isn't an art subject in the K-12 program.

Part of the Met's revitalized mandate is offering artist residency programs for young Filipino artists. What traits, characteristics, or distinctions qualify an artist for a residency at the Met?

TC: Our artists on residence will be carefully chosen, whether by jury or curatorial. But the Met is open to bridging artistic cultures from different art institutions around the world, we are open to sending our very own artists and hosting artists from different countries in order to start a global dialogue as to what contemporary art is all about.

What projects or undertakings does the Met aim to spearhead in the future for our contemporary artists?

TC: We are having a Napoleon Abueva retrospective on April, then we have an ASEAN multi-media exhibit on Riverscapes. And we are also looking at inviting a photographer from France to exhibit new ways of archiving through technology. Then, towards the end of the year, we might have another ASEAN exhibition. And for the BSP, we are looking at doing an exhibit on "Botanica." Then perhaps, by next year, we may have something about Contemporary Design. So it's very exciting.

Given these, as well as your mandate of "Art for All," who do you think will come to the doors of the Metropolitan Museum?

TC: We want different publics, from young people, public school children, our donors, to appreciate exactly the role of the Met in all of this, that we do not discriminate among our audiences. And what is important is that we want them to participate, get involved, and be engaged in the activities here in the Met.

Lastly, the Metropolitan Museum of Manila is set to host its fundraising gala to launch the new Filipino contemporary art showcase of the museum, which is bound to be a new annual tradition attended in by the country's culturati. What are the highlights to be expected in this hot-ticket event?

TC: The "Philippine Contemporary" art exhibit is a milestone, and we would like every Filipino to be proud of our artists from the 20th century to the present. The Met gala and annual dinner is also significant in bringing together institutions, corporate entities, and supporters who believe and share the vision of the museum.