

Report on 2nd Palawan Indigenous Visual Artists' Exhibition
The 2nd Annual Indigenous People's Visual Art Show was held in Asturias
Hotel, May 3-9, 2007 in Puerto Princesa City Palawan

Getting started: Leg working

Fresh from facilitating a workshop on painting (after the annual Arts Festival conducted by a local art gallery), I was sought to perform the curatorial work for this exhibition. Accepting this responsibility is not an easy task, as it requires a group effort from among the community and volunteer individuals. After a brief meeting with Carlton Hughes, the schedule for the exhibition was set for May 5-9, 2007, and I began work on April 23.

The list of reference persons handed down to me by Carlton is based from last year's event, and confusion from past curatorial work made to include the non-indigenous artists to participate. There are handful contemporary artists in the city but majority are non-indigenous. This means one thing for me as a curator: I have to reach out for those multitudes of buried indigenous talents living undiscovered somewhere in the province.

Palawan is a huge expanse of land and cell phone networks are limited to only some area. Scattered along it are the communities living independently among each other. In order to reach out to this community, one has to travel many hours along dusty and bumpy road.

Bumpy road ahead

April 23: With budget on hand and twelve days remaining, with loads of work to be done, I traveled to Aborlan (one- and-half hour travel from the city) to meet up with the Aborlan group in the south, then I proceeded to Narra municipality but with zero prospects. At the onset, I was given a list by a friend of contact persons in the south-Brookes point and Quezon municipalities.

April 24: Things would have been routine work, since I am used to curatorial works, but unexpected squabbles due to identity crisis of some members and misunderstanding of *Foundation's* guidelines led the guild to turn its back on the proposed event. Having accepted the project in my lap, I have to choose now between responsibility through helping an institution to support the indigenous people artists or dropping it, since I have nothing lose. My personal convictions prevailed. ...I am now on a solo saga to organize everything, with guidance from Foundation personnel.

April 25: Although dismayed, I left for El Nido municipality in the north with my spouse to act as my personal assistant. The travel is long and tiresome- 9 hours of dusty and bumpy road. Imagine what one is succumb to do in the entire journey, -while sitting. I won't mind traveling to far places because I am bringing good news. The expected meeting was smooth and well received. My visit is appropriate because the local

artists are conducting an arts festival- now in its second year, and since I am also instrumental in its formation last year. The event is due every Earth day celebrations; scheduled every last week of April called Kalugtan Arts Festival. There are many indigenous communities involved in this affair. Thus, one activity the *Kalinawa Art Foundation* should consider is sponsoring a workshop, by sending -in facilitators for any art medium or discipline for the community.

April 27: I returned to the city having a confirmation of their participation, with barely a week to the event.

The venue

The first venue is Banwa Pension House, an alternative space known as artists hang-out cum backpacker's inn, made of native structures. It has a small hallway of about 10-15 meters long spreading out to veranda with about 8mx5m floor area with about 90 centimeter railings made of bamboo. The walls inside the structure are made of sawali. Considerations on how to transform this given space requires careful analysis. I opted to use fish net enclosure around the veranda, with canvas cloth to serve as walls to block the view from outside to eliminate distractions without altering the native ambiance. S-shaped tie-wires would serve as accessory to hang the two-dimensional artworks in the fish net. A special kind of lighting was needed since the space needs more illumination. So I designed a lighting fixture made of bamboo of about 3 feet long, slice it in half length-wise with a 50 watt incandescent bulb. The lighting fixtures are to be placed in a row on top of artworks. As for sculptures, I designed a 4 feet x 90 feet pedestal; the area requires 4 pieces of this kind of material. After the approval of the necessary budget allocation the construction of the pedestal has begun. It requires two carpenters, to be done within 3 days including the painting job. I only have 5 days left. At this length, the promotional streamers are on its way.

The lighting fixtures are being prepared. I reviewed my checklist: - so far I am halfway through. For this curatorial work, it requires preparation such as identification of artists and venue, invitation, organizing, promotion, documentation, hanging of artworks, and egress. Each needs a specified timeframe. At this point, I have to prepare the lists of guests to be invited, including the key persons necessary for the cutting of ribbons, speakers, identifying of judges, and master of ceremonies. I was also tasked to write the artists information, the exhibit notes, while arranging the physicality of the alternative space, and the posters.

Then the unexpected occurred - I was advised to change venue. Agreement between the *Foundation* and Banwa operator was not settled. This caused a gap that grew bigger and bigger as everyone, - the sponsoring institution and the venue became more restless while anticipating for the incoming activity. All this, without my knowledge. Identification of Banwa as the venue for the exhibit was arranged by the *Foundation*. This wrinkle could have been avoided had the curator been tasked to do the arrangements, since he knows the locality better. On the front line this means one

thing: I have to start from scratch. With barely four days left I must need some kind of miracle to make things done.

Along the way

With few days left after checking the physiological aspect of the final venue, assessments followed. I must decide immediately. The allotted area of the hotel venue is a veranda about 4 x 15meters in floor area, with few walls for hanging. A panel is necessary to hang the works. So I devise a panel that will serve as walls for the works to be shown properly.

Miracle came

It was a relief that advance party of *Foundation* personnel arrived. They help to stabilized and concretized intangible aspects of my works. Later on, my spouse and my brother volunteered to set up the panels. Ems Lucasan handled promotional materials, Rosalie Zerrudo for posted the announcements and other participants lend a hand.

Organizing the concepts

The panels that conceptualized should serve not only as provisions for hanging the paintings but also as an installation piece that would reflect the coastal community and diversity of themes to be represented- like a bountiful harvest of fish. The vernacular “baklad” a fish trapping device was the inspiration behind the installation. We came up with 8 pieces bamboo panels to be wrapped with fish net. An S-shapes hook was derived from tie-wires to hang the artworks.

Careful studies of the submitted works reveal a mixture of different modes and expressions. Palawan being a haven of self taught artists offered me a glimpse of independent multifaceted views, - raw, innocent and naïve, aside from traditional ones. I was amazed to discover that nobody submitted a non-representational style, a revelation that western art ideas has not intruded into their perspective. As for traditional arts, only 2 pieces were submitted, hence, the remaining works are all contemporary.

Documentation

A good camera is an advantage, especially in the hands of professional photographer for proper photo documentation. A professional or experienced eye is more effective in carrying this task. The photos of artworks are to be uploaded in the net for the international audience to see; hence, it should be of good quality. Considering the prevalence of art websites, one can noticed the advantages of clear and crisp images. Visual art is about what one can see; by doing these things it may add percentage to the rate of marketability of the artworks.

Tags for each artwork should contain the following information: **Title of work, Medium used Size and Name of artist.** To easily identify the creator of the work, also it will hasten the documentation and filing process. This is one of the usual gallery procedures. I am asserting these notes to aid in the improvement of the Foundations future activities, since we are all learning in the process.

Curating the works

The works submitted come from practicing artists, -however diverse, engages the viewers of stories and conversations, a strand of fibers that constitute the colorful weaving of our being- as a Filipino. Their artistic frameworks disclose tales of identity, culture, traditions, and faith. The mediums were oil, acrylic, pastel, charcoal, found objects, tapestry, rubber- cut prints and terra-cotta. Although the traditional parameter delineates boundaries for self-expression, the cross- cultural assertion within the island-due to presence of immigrants and tourists extended the artist's views. Their perspective however was not affected, if not minimal.

The arrangements of the works started with image of water or ocean, boat, then the sight of land mass and landscape, figures and people, genres, traditions and cultures, and culminated with the mountain and forest scenes .I was trying to illustrate emphasis in behalf of the viewers akin to backpackers and visitors expecting what to witness in Palawan.

Judging the competition

Half of the participants are fresh, and first timers. As a curator I was having dilemmas of competing them with the veteran. As it might do more harm than good, I am careful how to "unify" them into one single element as basis for effective judgment. Since technical aspects may cloud the context of art, to the un initiated- emphasis on content was lobbied.

The difficulty lies on the premise of comparing each medium's affectivity of capturing the retina. As every judge has different reception, I was told to refer to the rules that the Foundation imposed upon. In the true sense, we cannot judge the oil against charcoal, the watercolor against tapestry because this is not a proper artistic- friendly formula. The rules for competing two dimensional works could be flexible for a particular application; it should be by category as what the present-day art competition establishment is implementing. Through this, we might also be able to respect each artist's medium of expressing his views as an artist.

Assessments

Each abode is requiring a taste of its own. As dwellers conform to necessities that are subjective to local factors, such as environmental, traditional, cultural, and socio-economical. The implementing guidelines of the Foundation should be flexible in order to meet the demands of every venue where the project will be conducted. Guidelines

may be generic, but to be molded out by the key players, - the curators, during implementation- to suit the needs of every local venue.

As for Palawan experience, there should be leg working activities 2-3 months prior to the date of exhibit. The contemporary art scene is still in its infancy, it needs nurturing to help sustain the nutrient needed for its growth. In order to include unknown undiscovered talents in this province, outreach is a necessity. Specifically, indigenous artists needs more support to sustain their art in order to sustain their community's traditions.

Despite of what I've been through, everything is a learning process. I am glad to be part of this rewarding endeavor. Many doors were opened, as some doors been closed. Many indigenous artists were invited and hence, -discovered, it was a good start. They deserved to be recognized as they are the strands that constitute the colorful weaving of our identity.

The Kalinawa Art Foundation is laudable as one of the tangible answers to the question of who will support the indigenous visual artists, as governments' thrust is limited mostly to performing arts and music. A juried exhibition also added textures to the event as the participants may bring in prize money which may serve as consolation for those non-selling works.

More power.

Jonathan Benitez

May 12, 2007

Comment:

In this report; Jonathan Benitez raises four important questions. First, it is precisely because of the work required for these events that the *Foundation* tries to identify, and then work with local institutions as partners. For this event, there were none and Jonathan is to be commended for his efforts, not only for the event, but also for accepting the ongoing responsibility for the art display resources. This is directly related to the second point: the choice of the venue. While technically correct that the curator decide the venue, what needs to be understood is that what is feasible from a curator's point of view may not be from the *Foundation's*. Thus, the curator is involved in the decision, but the final choice is made by the *Foundation*. Specifically, if a suitable venue decides to charge a fee for the use of their space, that amount must be balanced against other activities (such as outreach to communities, expenses for artists from distant communities to participate in the exhibition) undertaken by the *Foundation*.



Third, it is true that as an organization focusing on the visual arts, the *Foundation* must do a better job representing those arts through photography. However, the expense to do so must be seen in light of available resources and the fact that as the *Kalinawa Art Foundation* is building capacity, not only within itself, but also in local communities. In other words, the *Kalinawa Art Foundation* does not have limitless resources. As with the choice of a venue, trade-offs between different priorities for financial resources are continuously being made. Finally, the guidelines for these exhibitions are under continuous adjustment, but need to be made transparent and fair. Thus, each exhibition begins with the publication of general guidelines, but during the process of it being mounted, may be revised in light of submissions and the recommendation of the curator.

Carlton B. Hughes
Kalinawa Art Foundation
14 May 2007