



Portrait of JOVEN CUANANG.  
Courtesy Wigs Tysman / Philippine Tatler

A photograph of a courtyard. In the center is a tall, weathered stone tower with a circular opening and a bell-shaped top. To the right is a white wall with a large wooden door and a wooden pergola. In the foreground, there is a brick waterfall structure with a small pond. The courtyard is surrounded by lush green plants and a lawn.

# JOVEN CUANANG

## A Second Life

While surveying the Indigenous and contemporary Philippine art in the sunlit, al fresco galleries of Pinto Art Museum, I chanced upon a canvas by painter Winner Jumalon depicting a man with his shirt unbuttoned, exposing a scar across his chest. The stern-faced figure is Joven Cuanang, founder of the ten-year-old museum, located in a picturesque two-hectare botanical garden in the hillside city of Antipolo, an hour's bus ride from Metro Manila. In 1997, Cuanang suffered a heart attack and underwent quadruple bypass surgery. The 2006 painting, *Second Life Portrait*, acknowledges Cuanang's near-death experience, and the symbolic renewal of his life at the age of 57.

One of the foremost neurologists of the Philippines, Cuanang has always seen art as a form of medicine. Art "can ease the troubled mind better than Valium," he told me. Incorporating his art collection, knowledge of medicine, and ecological initiatives, Pinto Art Museum is one way in which the doctor promotes healing for others. Going around the museum, one will notice that the design is guided by the principles of nature: the pathways, winding around the open-air, stone buildings, are lined with native flora and running water. Cuanang also worked with artist Antonio Leaño to install tree-shaded beds strategically located between exhibition areas to provide space for rest, and outdoor sculptures and installations are integrated with the architecture and landscape. Leeroy New's untitled 2010 installation, for example, is a colossal sculpture of a brain that seems to emerge from a building's whitewashed facade. The work refers to the field of neuroaesthetics, which, Cuanang explains, "has helped us in understanding which parts of the brain are involved when one beholds a thing of beauty, and what neurotransmitters evoke the happiness that ensues."

Cuanang's fascination with art as a restorative practice can be traced back to his early days as a medical professional in Manila. It was 1966, and a young group of fine-arts students had arrived at the hospital where he was a practicing intern to help a nurse put up the backdrop for a play. Among the artists was the young Benedicto Cabrera. "He volunteered to draw me," Cuanang recalled of his first encounter with the painter, who would later become a celebrated National Artist. From then on, every five years for the past 55 years, Cabrera has completed a pro-bono portrait of Cuanang to commemorate their friendship.

The doctor-collector's engagement with art eventually led him to build a notable artistic community. After his postgraduate studies in neurology at Harvard, he returned to the Philippines in 1969. Seeking weekend respites from his medical practice and academic life as a lecturer, he built his house in Antipolo, which he called "El Refugio." Following the People Power Revolution of 1986, which ousted President Ferdinand Marcos, he invited art students from the University of the Philippines to join him in the pilgrimage town, and, soon, young artists arrived at Antipolo not just to talk about art and draw, but also to plant trees. This group included members of the collective Salingpusa, whose works were not recognized by established galleries at that time. "I lamented their plight. Quietly, I thought of a way where their artistic talent could be recognized and appreciated." Cuanang thus converted his backyard into a gallery, and for their first exhibition in the early 1990s, the Salingpusa hung their works from a clothesline. The drawings and paintings by Antonio Leaño, Elmer Borlongan, Mark Justiniani, Emmanuel Garibay, Joy Mallari, Jose John Santos III, and others were sold in what is fondly remembered as the "Sampayan" (clothesline) show.

In 2010, Cuanang expanded his humble abode into Pinto Art Museum, the *pinto*, or door, symbolizing "new ways of art expressions, and welcoming change in society through art." The centerpiece of Pinto's Gallery 1 is Salingpusa's multipanel mural *Karnabal* (1992), depicting various seditious scenes. In one section, Darna, the Filipino comics superhero, is a pole dancer, and in another, toy soldiers gun down farmers on a shelf while a businessman sleeps in the corner. These sensational imageries represent the collective's musings on the country's difficult recovery following the fall of the Marcos regime, and the nation's demands for a second life. Elsewhere in the museum are many works that artists have gifted to the doctor. In one of the galleries is a 2011 oil painting by Santos of a worn-out doctor's bag with a sphygmomanometer and a neurohammer, the basic tools of Cuanang's profession, installed behind a glass pedestal enclosing the actual bag. It is the artist's attempt at intimating the doctor's purposeful dedication to medicine through the surviving objects of his labor.

Besides Pinto, Cuanang oversees other art spaces, including Boston Gallery in the Cubao district of Quezon City, which paved the way for the first solo exhibitions of many

artists, including those of Salingpusa. The gallery's vision when it was first established in the 1990s was to allow artists to express their creativity, uncensored by commerce. "The well-heeled collector shunned the bald street dwellers of [Borlongan], and the tirades of Garibay against the church, politicians, military, and landlords. Those that were not sold that struck my heart and soul, I bought," Cuanang explained. Boston was also open to the students of Roberto Chabet, who ushered conceptual art into the local scene, though Cuanang said, "I did not realize I was helping shape the artistic taste of Manila." In 2017, to grow the reach of Pinto Art Museum, he cofounded Pinto International with physician and scientist Luca Parolari in New York. Under this arm of Pinto, a 2018 exhibition brought works by 56 Filipino artists, including painters Geraldine Javier, Marina Cruz, and Rodol Tapaya, to Tokyo. Furthermore, the doctor continues to commission artworks for the hospitals he manages.

In December 2019, Pinto Art Museum opened Gallery 7, marking the museum's tenth anniversary and Cuanang's 80th birthday. Pinto's most capacious building to date, the 1,200-square-meter wing houses large-scale installations, such as conceptual artist Nilo Ilarde's 22,425 die-cast cars, *Pinto Art Museum is full of objects, more or less interesting; I wish to add 22,425 more.* (2019). Other works, by multidisciplinary artist Salvador Alonday, sculptor Agnes Arellano, and video artist Martha Atienza, to name a few, are displayed in eight separate rooms.

Nowadays, Cuanang's priorities include his own health, so when the whole of Luzon archipelago went under lockdown in March due to Covid-19, the doctor decided to help combat the disease from his home in Antipolo. From Borlongan, his long-time friend, he commissioned a drawing depicting a doctor in protective gear, which he shared on social media in honor of those on the frontlines.

While the world has been plunged into abrupt change, Cuanang maintains a hopeful outlook: "The salutary effects of the humanities in addressing our maladies is slowly being realized to complement the drugs discovered by painstaking research. Our forefathers have known the healing powers of music, dance, and storytelling since time immemorial, and the convergence of the humanities and the arts will help in the attainment of our wholeness as individuals, a renaissance in our times." As a neurologist, art patron, and humanitarian, Cuanang has inarguably played a key role in setting the foundations for this revival.