

Art Explainer

Let me explain.

Jigger Cruz Superstar



Jigger Cruz - "Obnoxiously Beautiful," Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 inches, 2010 grabbed from West Gallery website

Jigger Cruz was among the country's under 30 superstars but can he live up to the hype?

There are a number of reasons attributed to the success of Jigger Cruz, the most recent darling du jour of Philippine painting. The easy one is that he did something differently but not dumbfounding. He created a middle ground in contemporary painting between the conservative and the avant garde ambitions and was accessible to the power players who lifted him up to prominence. His works seemed, at first, untamed and fresh but were also flattering in a living room.

It's been a full two years now since I first saw his paintings and JC's wings have yet to spread fully. A little bird told me, more shows in Europe, one in the famous Louvre museum (by direct selection of its curator), a solo feature in the Armory Show, and representation in a major gallery in the US is forthcoming before the year ends.

A long way definitely for the wunderkind from Malabon. If all of these falls through, he will be the most prominent name in Philippine Art.

For all the experimentations, expectations, and the gimmicks over what should define contemporary art, Jigger only took what was there, much as what other successful painters before him did. Emanating from the context of a broken art community with a strange artistic tradition, he set out turning the whole practice of painting on its head by focusing on chaos, with paintings that have a sort of an unformed and unstable nature, its violence, and making a saga out of that, a formula that has earmarked him for importance: the promise of a star.

Like many other painters JC started out in the underground. Born and raised, as he once joked, near the factory of Rufina Patis, and educated at the Far Eastern University, Cruz was in and out of many cheap studios until he took up an apprenticeship with Manuel Ocampo at the defunct Department of Avant Garde Cliches and a studio residency at Light and Space Contemporary. Before that, while sharing an apartment with another painter, Jason Montinola, Jigger was not only living the classic drama of a struggling artist, he epitomized it. There were days when they would share a single viand of steamed kangkong or okra, which JC found dreadful but had grown to like eventually. As Montinola had put it in words, "Walang choice! You eat that or you go hungry!" The experience had so marked JC that even when he had already started selling paintings he would prefer the steamed veggie viand, perhaps as a reminder of humble beginnings.

To friends and new acquaintances, JC remains the same, but his works have not. Since those days he took each painting more ambitiously so that without the monetary value pinned on them, it would've taken us so many years to come to terms with his vast but essentially very simple artistic practice.

But the shock value of Jigger Cruz's practice, is actually late by at least a hundred years. The issues he confronts in his paintings are the very reasons that gave rise to modern painting. But only in his stark opposition of figure and abstraction, or better the classical/conservative against the modern/revolutionary in a single work did it become apparent. Coming out of a generation (my generation) strongly beholden to figurative painting, it was only a matter of time when his kind of works appeared. His works are an occasion to observe the boring but deeply seated issues between vehemently opposed, albeit farcically, aesthetics of our time.

Jigger's first forays into painting had already been met with favor. He triumphed in small painting contests in school, an occasion which he recalls with a certain nostalgia. Those days, JC knew

what sort of paintings won contests but he was still uncertain if the career of an exhibiting artist was for him. After graduating from FEU, he took up a course in Multimedia Arts at the College of St. Benilde in La Salle. It was a career decision trumped by his love for painting. He couldn't last doing things on a computer, I recall him saying. Even then he would still go back to painting, watching out for art contests and joining group exhibitions.

A curious thing happened last year when one of his entries to an art contest turned up on the black market. Apparently, one his professors sold a painting donated to the university. Jigger gave a go signal to a collector to purchase the painting rather than wonder where it would go. In his words, "Baka kung saan pa mapunta."

From this event, we see the evidence of Jigger's rise as a painter and also the unscrupulous behaviors of certain people in the art market.

I first met Jigger Cruz at the UP College of Fine Arts where he was visiting an ex-girlfriend. A beautiful freshman. I have heard of him before, and thought the guy must be smug. What with a name like 'Jigger' can you expect a humble and congenial guy with a good taste in music and art. I eventually made the acquaintance of JC while working as a curator at the defunct City School, where we held the very last exhibition entitled "Impending Doom." Out of 20 works on view, only JC's work was sold. It was a collage with oil paint, a torn canvas, and potato chips, which my girlfriend back then absolutely hated but I staunchly defended. It was the first among his abstractions but no one knew its significance and was sold for a fraction of its estimated worth now.

The reason being, that the contradictions implicated in the work of JC stems from an audience with unrefined tastes or an audience still smitten by the esoteric, cultivating mystery ever more than technique. Bound by notions of what contemporary painting should be like, and what attitudes it should foreground, rather than merely being in dialogue with a tradition. It is in this same extent that JC confines the meaning of his works to the precise appeal of the colorful surface.

Lets backtrack a bit to JC's exhibition in West Gallery in September 2011. The very first time his works were featured in a cohesive exhibition. What intrigued me was, when I saw the paintings, it looked like something that crossed my mind. This is and will always be the quality of a good painting for me, when it pushes the viewer to empathize with the painting enough to assume that he could have done it himself.

Only a few months before that, a collector had turned down a Jigger Cruz painting when it was offered at the booth of West Gallery in Manila Art 2012 because he had already 'bought something else.' Contrast this to his Blanc exhibition in 2014 where collectors put a reserve on his paintings they have not even seen.

My conclusion is that nobody really bothered what was there to like in Jigger Cruz except that the economy behind it had swept the art world like a storm surge. No one knew what it was like until it happened.

Jigger did not break a tradition of painting, in fact he signaled the successful return of painting in the mainstream. It turned out, painting was only dead...in the Philippines. Those who came before him, Rodel Tapaya, Ronald Ventura, and John Santos were just heralding the return as spin offs of the 80s social realist painters, when the medium thrived in the hands of first and second quarter storm painters.

In the waning years of Chabet-era conceptualism and the subsequent, albeit misguided return to figurative painting ushered in by poor mentorship in our art academies, along came Jigger Cruz, who braved the murky history of painting, the loaded instruments of oil painting and the weight of all the wrong done in the name of art. His entrance is the prophecy and the mocking to the generations of painters before him.

Jigger once told me his least favorite works are those that are framed because he only made them to destroy the very identity of the painting as painting and in effect to demolish the very definition of what a painting ought to look like and how it should be treated (not your grandmother's heirloom)

The unmixed chemical color sometimes squeezed straight out of a tube or through an icing pipe entails the process of freely, joyously, and bravely painting works that give flavor of life, as one would have on a piece of cake. The play is on the opposition of such colors (greens vs. reds, reds vs. oranges, greens vs. yellows, etc.) He draws from modernist techniques, including but not limited to those used by artists of L'art brut, Arte Povera, German Neo-expressionism, the Spatialism, and combines them.

The motivation

Jigger Cruz works without an underlying discipline, though, he is always hard at work. What I mean is that, he does not work with a system but essentially against it. He does not have the hidden geometrics of minimalists, no special techniques you can't learn on your own, and though he has worked on pieces of old masters, he expresses disregard for them by sometimes hiring assistants (and more often repeating their work when he is not satisfied). While he has trained formally in the fine arts and apprenticed with his seniors, he has not sought the traces of older painters and placed them on their canvas. Whatever he has painted, he has discovered on his own.

But JC of recent, who has had to deal with rising auction prices and international representations has doubts, gropes, and hesitations, instead of deepening his discovery. His later works in ARNDT Berlin booth at the Singapore Art Stage have been a bit of disappointment to many of his

followers. For me, it appeared a bit fragmented, and without direction. What manifested was no longer the enthusiasm of the West Gallery exhibition but the exhaustion of the i-can-never-go-wrong-because-i'm-young. The shows in ARNDT reek of the causes for early retirement from the wretched occupation of being an artist.

For a while i thought, his paintings no longer bear the delight of genius that was the aura of his earlier paintings until I visited his studio and was absolutely stunned by an original painting done in 1943 by a student of Amorsolo which he had painted on. This he did only to be shown in his house and I concluded, that the commerce will kill him and will derail his work from its objective to be difficult and disgusting to the very audiences that view them. I remember the time when Jigger would laugh every time someone said sorry for touching the oil paint and find out that it was still wet or when his frames get accidentally damaged. It's all part of his work's character that wishes to downplay all the 'non-sense of painting display' and preservation in order to highlight the collapsible and often ephemeral investment of soul and spirit onto the canvas.

How Jigger got his international break

I recall a story how JC got his break. Interior decorator and art manager Miguel Rosales had scheduled a show in Italy for the painter, Pow Martinez. Due to conflicts in schedule or contracts Martinez, informed Rosales that he couldn't make it. While visiting Martinez in his studio, he chanced on JC's works which were kept downstairs and so he offered the show to him instead.

But his show in Italy did not confirm him as an artist nor did it reinforce him. At best it indicated that the strength of his works was too big for the pond of the Manila art scene. In a few months he would exhibit internationally again, this time in a solo feature with Primo Noctis in Lugano, Switzerland a subsidiary of Primo Marella in Milan. But even the strength of the Milan-based gallery cannot contain him. In less than a year, the Berlin-based Matthias Arndt would eventually pick him up, after signing on Rodel Tapaya and Geraldine Javier a few months earlier. The difference? Unlike Tapaya or Javier, JC at 28 then, has no museum shows, is not a 13 Artists Awardee or was ever nominated for an Ateneo Art Award. His rise in the art scene says screw you to all the institutions that portend or pretend to legitimize the kind of art that deserves to be seen.

Some sources have denied this, but my favorite story of Jigger was how he was repeatedly rejected when submitting portfolios to certain galleries along Pasong Tamo. After his international debut, these same galleries would offer him solo exhibitions. Instead he showed in Light and Space, then based in Fairview where I was starting out as an assisting curator to the generous Jason Tecson. It was a show of 22 works on paper and three oil on canvasses, all were snatched on the first day of installation. It was the first sold out exhibition of the gallery.

Around this time, the work of Ventura went unsold in the Christies Auction and activities of suspicious entities like the "art mafia" had circulated. Suddenly, contracts became de rigueur

among art galleries who wanted to keep their most prized artists. Case in point was when Rodel Tapaya bolted out of the formidable Drawing Room Gallery after a major exhibition at the Vargas Museum. New aggressive spaces had been put up. It was an exciting time, which became more apparent in the explosive debut of Art Fair Philippines in February 2013.

It was almost natural and even imminent that a supernova was occurring. The fertile skies had it written and a superstar was born.

How did the art market suddenly single out one young painter? My explanation is rather sentimental because in the years I have worked with Jigger Cruz as a writer and curator, I have always responded to his creations in the same way. Anyone who has ever been young and in love and besotted with idealism can't help but respond to Jigger's expression of so much freedom and recklessness. He has the natural painter's gift—but more important, he has the power to lend an extraordinary vitality and glamour to the activities that make the art.

Many of the most successfully daring postwar painters committed to the establishment of an art tradition and the translation of styles. Zobel abruptly shifted to abstraction after seeing a Mark Rothko as a student in Rhode Island. Lee Aguinaldo patterned his abstractions after the painters of East 10th Street, New York where he had briefly resided. Abueva and Joya in the 50s came back from schooling in the US where they refined their modernist tendencies, shedding their more traditional works to set-up a more up-to-date curriculum at the UP Fine Arts. Rod Paras-Perez was a Harvard-educated critic who espoused a certain look and feel, kept the tempo of the art scene to the tune of those heard in the West. In all these events, Filipino artists have not actually pioneered anything. Merely growing art by grafting from developments elsewhere. This trend continues until today.

Jigger is in the company of those artists, along with a few more senior painters. Well-trained in the sensibilities of western contemporary art, his visual control has become impeccable. One is struck by his ability to nudge on his long, deliberate, graceful stroke – like one would sketch a line- squeeze by squeeze: the abstract painting supplants the laboriously painted figure beneath.

The importance of criticism

Jigger has suffered a fate worse than being unjustly neglected by criticism: he's been unjustly praised in all the wrong forums.

Without serious analysis, his paintings will become at best, moot and academic experiments, and most audiences, looking in his life for the revolutionary painter that his devotees claim to have discovered, will be disappointed. Nothing much has been written of him even in the papers and while his works grace the pages of glamorous magazines, I doubt if opinions by fashionistas actually amount to anything in the long-term.

It is also not clear to many even in write-ups even by international galleries which currently represent him, what his actual motivations are for painting and how it is significant in the current milieu.

JC is among the few painters who painted for a future time, and we, especially we, in the art world, have only begun to appreciate him. Considering his early rise, one suspects a glum shadow over his work. The question of, will it fail, or will it endure?

I remember the socialite painter Oscar Zalameda was once the most expensive Filipino artist but last I checked, his paintings have no takers yet on Ebay.

My assessment can only be tendentious and biased because as his friend, I have a stake in his success and I sincerely wish JC all the best. But let me explain it this way: the information revolution and greater access for independent research by artists has created what I call a 'permanent now,' something originally conceptualized in music history. This notion pertains to the elimination of our sense of artistic eras. If you took the long view, Jigger Cruz is only among the first wave of artists who have worked with no particular clique, movement, coterie, or school. He has established the style almost independently. In other words, he either stands out as a genius or a fluke. His success will be determined not by how hard his agents are working or how many paintings can be sold in his lifetime, it will ultimately be defined by those who follow in his footsteps.

In comparison to the nuclear explosion of superstars elsewhere, Jigger Cruz arrived for the Philippine Art world like a time-bomb, seeming completely opportune and revelatory at once – his importance being the culmination of many struggles in painting and also the beginning of an exploration towards an infinite possibility in art making unrestrained by many baggages. How could we not view Amorsolo or Luna or Zobel or Aguinaldo without Jigger Cruz in mind, the offspring of decades of wandering in the desert without fulfilling the promise land of a true national art form. In this Exodus, Cruz works instantly insisted themselves as an anchor of possibilities. It certainly proved what was possible for a Filipino painter who only worked locally to sail away towards the horizon of the international art scene.

To be continued...