

NEPTALIE AUNZO PAINTS...AND THE FIRST TIME HE SAW FATHER

BY DAVID JONATHAN Y. BAYOT

"I am a child who is getting on."
-Marc Chagall



S*iya Nga!* It was in 2018, while working on a De La Salle University book project with a Jesuit priest-astrophysicist, Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarín—who was then president of Ateneo de Manila University—when I got (re-)acquainted with the watercolor artworks of Filipino painter Neptalie “Rico” Aunzo that are in my modest collection.

Back then, Fr. Villarín and I were working towards a book of “reflections with art.” We intended the book to offer the readers a selection of short reflections by Fr. Jett (as he’s fondly called) on fifty-two familiar/

familial terms in the Christian faith (e.g., *Incarnation, Trinity, even Christmas*). In that book, it’s our plan to have each meditation “illustrated” by the work of a Filipino artist.

Time came for us to choose an artwork that would “make plain” the Christian concept of “fairness” and complement Fr. Villarín’s reflection on God’s sense of “merit.” The meditation was meant to reckon with a bugbear of many Christians: the unfairness and absurdity (to some) of God’s logic of offering the same nature of love and salvation to people who are “not good (enough),” as he would to those who are “good”!

Our search for the suitable image landed us on a watercolor drawing on a legal-size paper. It is a Cubist-inspired piece of Naïve art titled “A Father’s Love”—that is, a monochromatic representation of two not-too-small children though depicted in diminution and in dependence, held in the sheltering embrace of a father whose torso, arms, and hands are evidently exaggerated and assuredly protective. And we think that this work, albeit small in size, is quite a striking visual evocation of the meditation’s defining thought—that, like the unbearable lightness and fragility of the kids’ being in the grand

(AT RIGHT) “*Simbang Gabi*”, 2021, 30 x 40 inches, acrylic on canvas, David Jonathan Bayot Collection.
(TOP) Artist Neptalie “Rico” Aunzo.





scheme of things, the human species and the so-called merit that it loves to believe it possesses would, in the final analysis, be deemed as utterly weightless, plainly “helpless,” and simply devoid of any point...when considered on the scale of God’s probity...were it not held with grace by God’s love.

Prior to meeting Aunzo in person on January 28, 2020—during the launching of *Siya Nga! Reflections with Art* (which features the artworks of National Artist Benedicto Cabrera or BenCab, Betsy Westendorp, Wig Tysmans, Elmer Borlongan, and a good number of contemporary Filipino artists)—I’ve always had the impression that Aunzo must have had a most heartening relationship with his father, especially during the artist’s childhood years. I had known for some time that “Father and Son(s)” has been a central motif in his body of works. In fact, one time when I revisited the folder containing Aunzo’s watercolor artworks in my collection, I was still surprised to notice that there are, in fact, fourteen of them (created in 2018 alone) that are beguiling as well as emotionally charged pieces on fatherhood and the various poses such parental bonding

could take. As I paged through the file, I found myself no less fascinated by the morphing and shifting of the forms of intimate interdependence between father and son(s).

Though in fascination, I’ve never stopped wondering why the mien of his fathers and sons (at least those in his watercolor works) would be hanged with such weight of inexplicable, foreboding sadness!

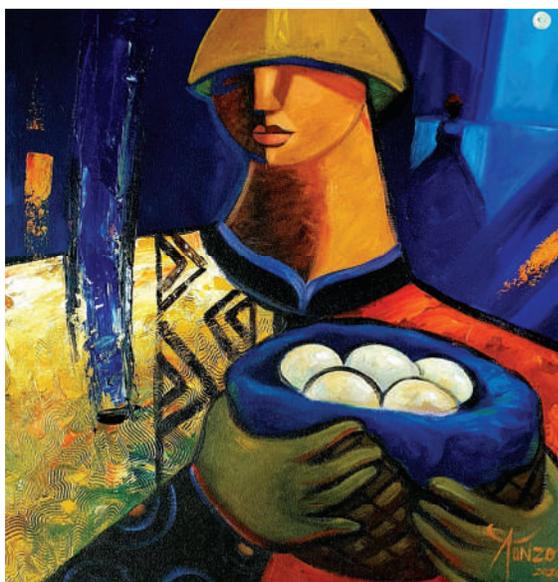
Sometime in the last quarter of 2020, I had the chance to catch up with Aunzo and his “dreamwork” of art making in the midst of the surreality of the pandemic period. And naturally, our conversation found its way to the subject of his life and work as an artist: his beginnings (specifically as a painter), his artistic influences, and his fascination with local colors (literally and figuratively).

Aunzo mentioned that he has been fascinated with drawing since he was a kid and was active in poster-making competitions while in high school. But soon after his secondary education, he knew that he could no longer afford to dwell on that “hobby” of creation, no matter how deeply he feels for this endeavor. His family needed him to be

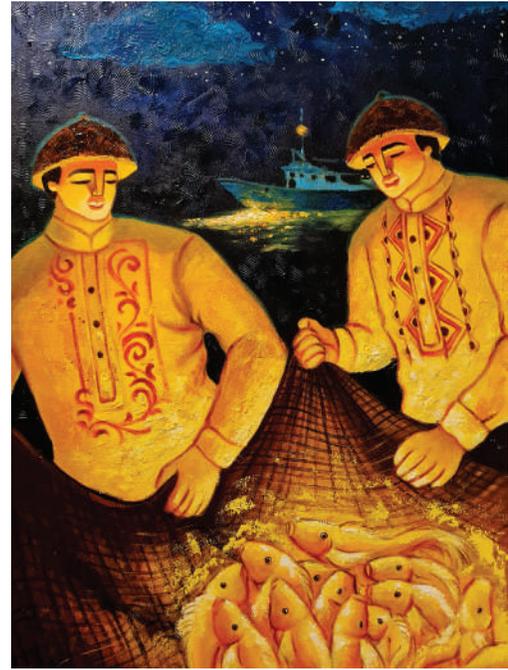
the breadwinner—that, he said, was loud and clear to him.

It was at this point of the conversation that I was reminded of an early impression I had regarding Aunzo’s persistent interest in the fatherly presence. I went on to ask him about his dad but soon felt awkward about it when, with a nervous smile, the artist responded with deliberation, *I’ve never met my father and never knew what he looks like. My mother said I inherited my interest in art making from my father, but that’s about the only thing of significance that I know about him.*

I was still in a state of bafflement at the artist’s disclosure when Aunzo continued, *That’s why, since I gave up my work of many years in the telecom industry and decided to be a fulltime painter in 2018 when I was already 29, I couldn’t resist the compulsion to paint, again and again, images of father.* He went on, *It’s bittersweet for me to say this—I first saw Father only when I started painting what I imagined him to be like. On paper and on canvas, I tried to figure out what it’s like to have a father, to be carried in his arms, and to grow up with him around.*



(FROM LEFT) “Balut Vendor”, 2020, 24 x 24 inches, acrylic on canvas, David Jonathan Bayot Collection; “Kaagapay”, 2020, 36 x 36 inches, acrylic on canvas, David Jonathan Bayot Collection. (TOP) Selections from “Father and Son Series”, all made in 2018, 8.5 x 14 inches each, watercolor on paper, David Jonathan Bayot Collection.



(TOP, FROM LEFT) "Bayanihan", 2020, 36 x 48 inches, acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist; "Laot", 2020, 30 x 40 inches, acrylic on canvas, Marvin Tiu Lim Collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

But like Aeneas of ancient literature, the artist knew that while he can't leave his father behind, the growing imperative for him to depart from the burning city of nostalgia and to carry on with his family, his life ahead... was too compelling to be ignored. In the end, he departed and carried on, with his father "on his back."

Aunzo said, At some point, I realized I had to move on. While it's oftentimes consoling to dwell on possible lives that I could have lived with my father in my imagination and art, I have to admit that it has come to a point that I felt "haunted" by that possibility. And the experience has grown to have a debilitating effect on me. Now that I'm a father myself, my biggest wish is to be the best dad to my son. And my biggest dream—to paint the kind of world that I'd like my son to live in.

How does that world look like? For Aunzo, it's essentially a Home. It's a place, a family where "ordinary" Filipinos—as the artist sees himself and the vast multitude who share his fate and also his dream—can be rooted and can possess, as Gabriel García Márquez puts it, "a second opportunity on earth."

It's a world filled with Pedrong Masipag (Peter the Diligent) and not Juan Tamad (John the Indolent), a character in Philippine folklore known for his laziness. It's a world where the Pedrong Masipags from all walks of life (so to speak) are presented in Aunzo's signature character style—angular or slightly distorted figures that appear idol-like, introspective, with long necks and portentous eyes that are shut. These characters, despite their Cubistically austere look, are however dressed uncannily in formal national dresses, the barong Tagalog. The characters are set, alongside their contextual planes, in strong and brash colors, applied with an apparent force of

spontaneity. In Aunzo's picture space—images, impressions, ideas, and emotions overlap in quite an evocative state of illogical proximity and magical naturalism. And in these dreamlike paintings, mystery and charm cradle a glow of buoyancy, and the mundane appears luminously "miraculous."

It's indelible that Aunzo's art has drawn sustenance from a humble world, where the "little" people—the likes of the *balut* vendor, the farmer, the fishermen—their fateful existence in a socially circumscribed space notwithstanding, are simply not afraid to take on big dreams, for the sake of Home—with a familial mindset and in familial setups beyond their own.

With a picture space that is interestingly marked by intersections of influences—from Cubism (in its interweaving of planes and lines), Fauvism (in its display of bright palette and fierce brushwork), Naïve Art (in its childlike easiness and a simplified perspective), Surrealism (in its occasioning of the uncanny), as well as from the artistic paths blazed by Filipino National Artists Vicente Manansala, Carlos "Botong" Francisco, Ang Kiukok, and Benedicto Cabrera (BenCab), also by Mauro Malang Santos and Lydia Velasco—the self-taught artist Neptalie Aunzo has, in fact, welded a personal style. It's a style that has remained true to where his memories are rooted and where his dreams take flight. It's a place where Pedrong Masipag creates and recreates a Home, just as he once did...and the first time he saw Father.

Notes: (1) Unless otherwise indicated, the images are courtesy of David Jonathan Bayot. (2) Italicized passages in English are the writer's translations/paraphrases of the artist's statements in Filipino.