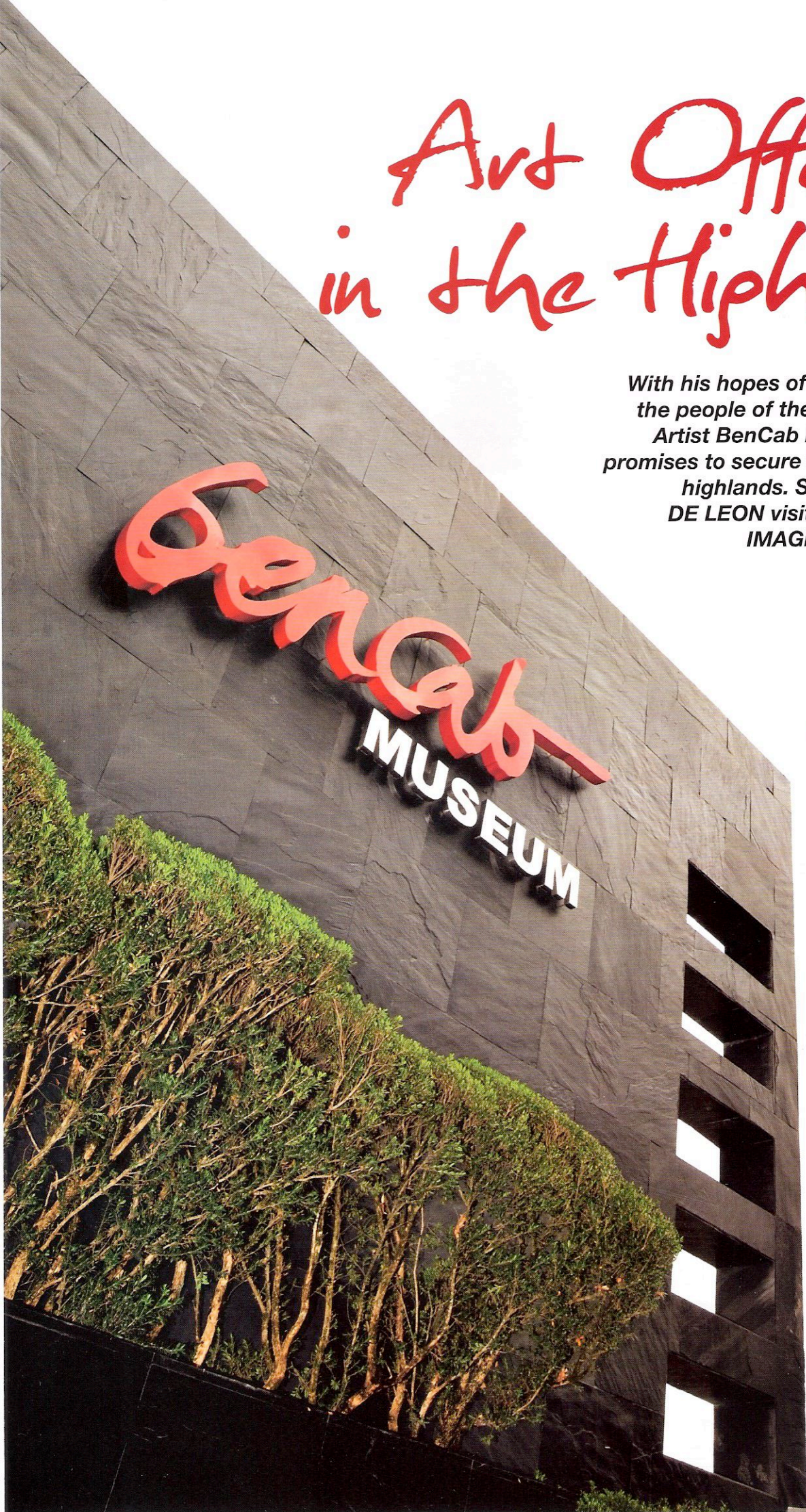
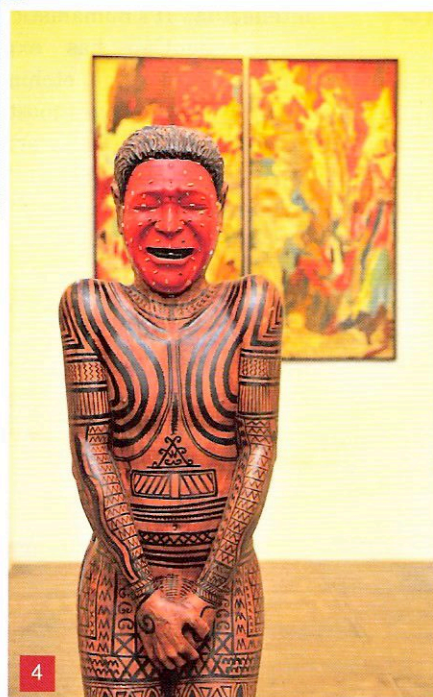
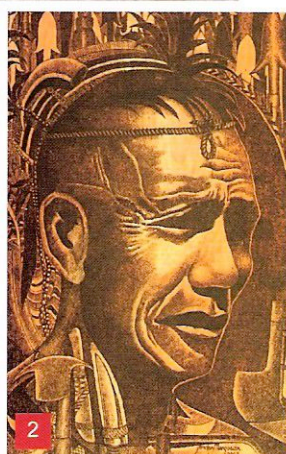
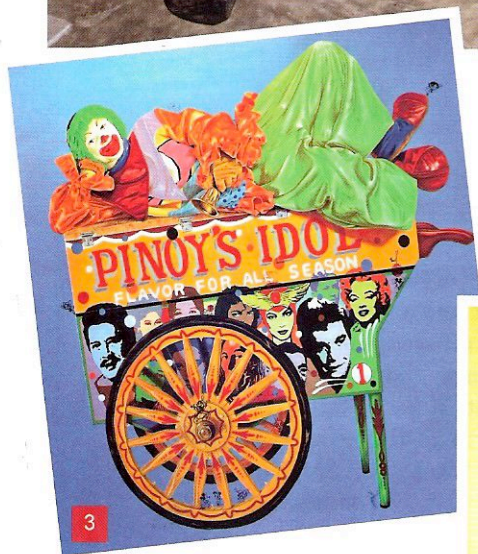


Art Offerings in the Highlands

With his hopes of bringing art closer to the people of the Cordilleras, National Artist BenCab builds a museum that promises to secure the place of art in the highlands. **SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON** visits this mountain gem. **IMAGES BY WIG TYSMANS**



The museum's deceptive one-storey facade gives no inkling to the multi-level structure that covers 1,700 square meters of floor area. The predominant colors of red, gray, black, and white are BenCab's favorite colors.



1. The airy interior of BenCab Museum showing a part of Gallery Indigo. 2. A detail of *The Igorot Culture* by Jordan Mang-Osan, a winner of the past Philippine Art Awards, shows the fine artistry needed in doing this solar painting. 3. *Pinoy's Idol* by Roland Ventura, also a winner of the past Philippine Art Awards, shows colorful pop culture icons on an ice cream cart. 4. A recycled wood sculpture by JunYee entitled *Pintado*, a part of the permanent collection in the Contemporary Philippine Art Gallery, details the intricate tatoos sported by locals in Leyte during the Pintados Festival.

Step into artist Ben Cabrera's latest masterpiece, the BenCab Museum, and you are immediately reminded of the symbiotic relationship between art and nature. Designed by Raymund Sarmiento, the three-level museum incorporates natural light and blends into its terraced surroundings so naturally that when seen from the street level, you barely notice its spacious size.

Although an artist's personal museum usually shows only his works, Cabrera's museum includes not just his paintings, but also the works he loves such as contemporary Filipino paintings and Cordillera art. Cabrera, who is known as BenCab in the art scene, says, "It's really sharing what I have and a way for me to appreciate my own collection in better surroundings. If I miss them, I just go to the museum."

Speaking of his passion for tribal art, Ben explains, "I love the directness and how you feel the spirit that the maker puts in. It's different from materialistic art that you sell. It's ritualistic art so you feel the passion of the person." Rooted largely on nature, the works from the Cordillera region are more of a way of life than art to be gazed at. All pieces, whether an Ifugao bench or lime containers (tabayag), or a spoon with a carved figure on its end, are based on function or rituals.

Incorporating both permanent and changing elements, the Gallery Indigo will have revolving collections and special shows on a range of topics, from maps and prints to vintage photographs of the old Philippines, to engravings of 19th century Filipinos from the artist's own collection.

The museum also has a function room to be used for private events such as dinners, lectures, book launches, and film screenings. Since the museum's opening in February 2009, it has hosted an art criticism workshop taught by writers, a printmaking workshop, handmade paper making classes, and a rice wine demonstration.

Plans are in the works for painting classes and art seminars, wherein artists can also spend a few nights enjoying the traditional Ifugao, Kalinga and Bontoc houses that are built on the property.

For those who want to take a piece of this peaceful world home with them, a range of items, including BenCab prints, art books, highland wood carvings and textiles, shirts, and caps are available in the gift shop. And if you want to just relax and enjoy the breathtaking mountain landscape, Café Sabel offers deliciously fresh and natural food with a view of the mountain.

Cabrera shares his motivation for the museum: "I wanted to give back, to leave a legacy beyond my paintings." Although the idea may have started by simply wanting to build a museum, he could very well end up creating a much-needed haven for art—a place for experienced artists to learn more, and for visitors to be surrounded by such beauty and tranquility that perhaps they, too, discover the artist in themselves.



The Artist: BenCab

Every artist has his muse, and in the world of Philippine contemporary art master and National Artist Ben Cabrera or BenCab, "Sabel is the woman who made me famous." She was a bag woman who roamed around the neighborhood in Santa Cruz where he lived as a child. He explains, "I just saw her and started to draw her. I don't know anything about her. I never met her. I like that mysterious image of an unknown woman. She became part of my growing years as an artist."

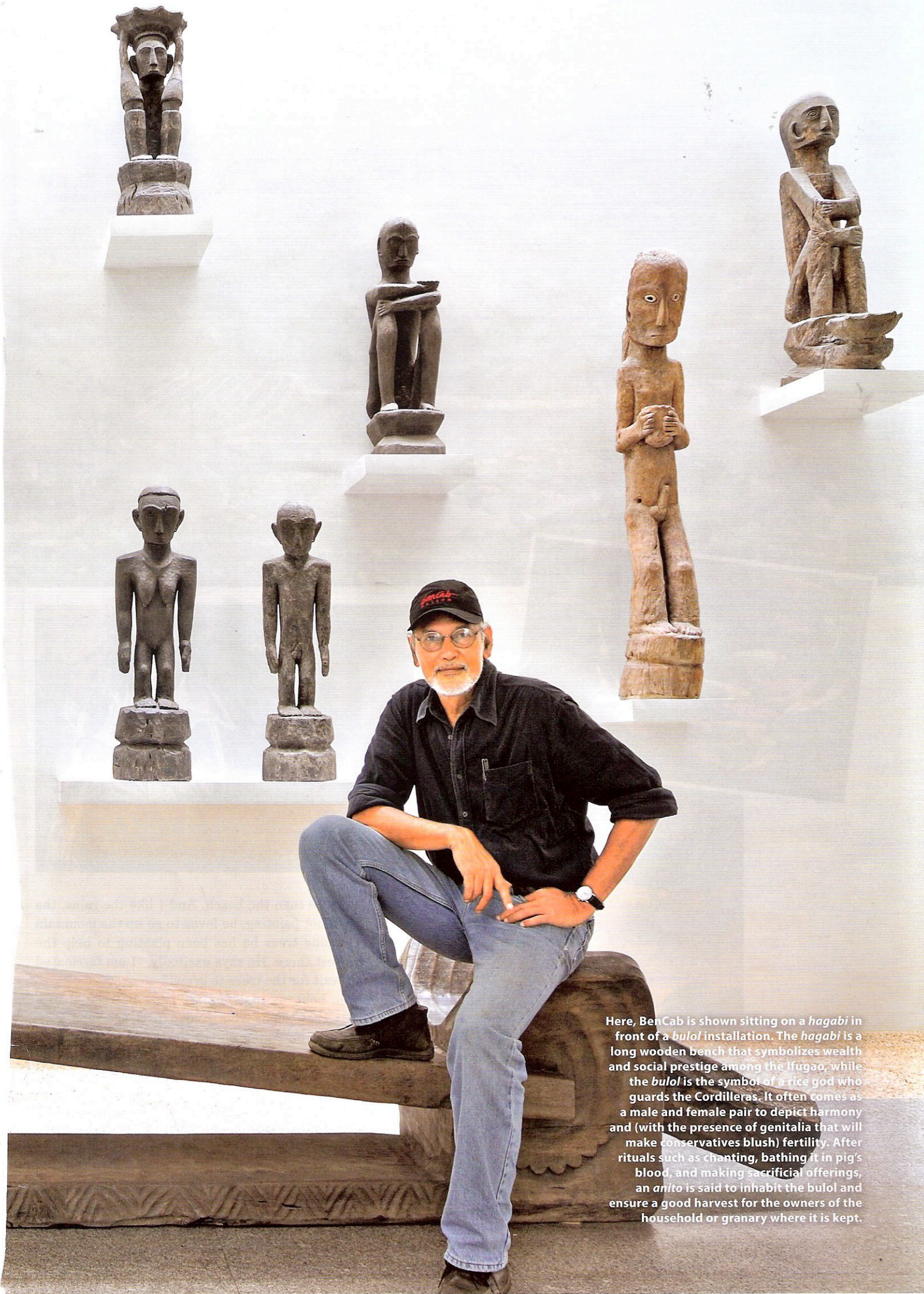
Forty five years into BenCab's career, Sabel's form remains in constant evolution, as does the work of her master. Although the wide range of his subjects includes women and men of Filipino history, the lives of 20th century migrants, the Cordillera people, musicians and nudes, their universal appeal easily touches people's lives. He says, "When I touch subjects such as lovers or typhoons, everybody is affected, whether rich or poor, Asian, or European." With easily recognizable figures

in many pieces, he feels his art is "not complicated or intellectual. It's humanistic and universal."

BenCab has expressed himself through sculpture, drawings, etchings, and paintings, but it is drawing that he loves most. It is also what he feels is his real strength as an artist. He remembers, "The first time I won an award, I was in primary school. It was for a human rights poster competition. Art was the only thing that focused my mind and drawing was an obsession for me."

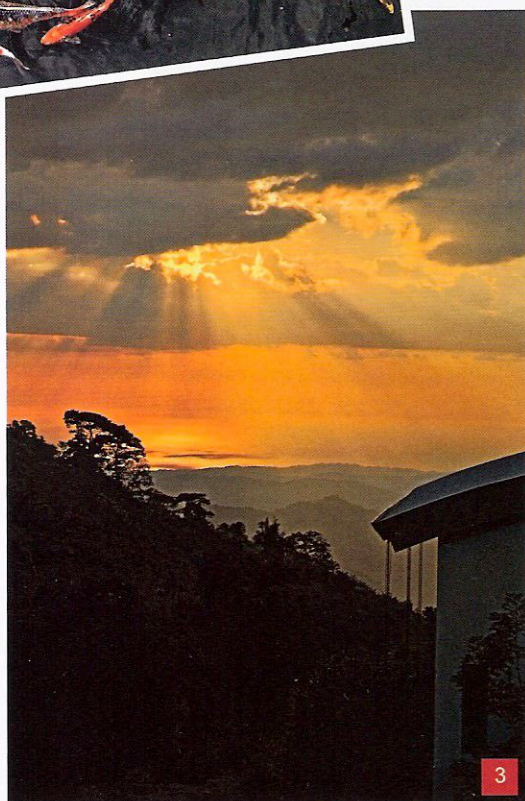
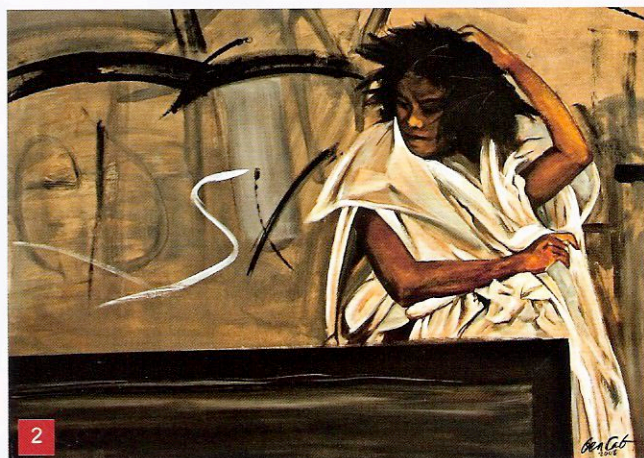
Additionally, the narrative elements of much of his work show the influence of the comic books that were the first forms of art he discovered as a child. Some of his paintings, such as the series on Filipinos abroad, are clearly telling a story. Not one to limit himself, some of his work focuses on just aesthetics. He explains, "Sometimes you just want to do pure forms without any comments. I go back and forth."

After living and working in Manila and London, BenCab has been a Baguio resident for 23 years. He says that after living in big cities, he has found his peace: "The mountain has a kind of energy



Here, BenCab is shown sitting on a *hagabi* in front of a *bulol* installation. The *hagabi* is a long wooden bench that symbolizes wealth and social prestige among the Ifugao, while the *bulol* is the symbol of a rice god who guards the Cordilleras. It often comes as a male and female pair to depict harmony and (with the presence of genitalia that will make conservatives blush) fertility. After rituals such as chanting, bathing it in pig's blood, and making sacrificial offerings, an *anito* is said to inhabit the *bulol* and ensure a good harvest for the owners of the household or granary where it is kept.

BenCab decided to buy the land across the museum to preserve it from commercial development which would have ruined this amazing view.



1. Koi and water are constant relaxing feature in all of BenCab's residences.

2. BenCab's icon, Sabel, was a real-life scavenger from his old neighborhood.

3. From a distance, the South China Sea can be seen from the museum at sunset.

that I like more than the beach. And I like the rains, the fog..." When not painting, he loves to go up the mountain to visit the pine trees he has been planting to help the depleted forest there. He says excitedly, "I am fascinated and I can't wait for the trees to grow!"

Ben believes that fine art must be related to a personal art that comes from your experiences and your soul. Since first emerging on the art scene in the 1960s, BenCab's art has mirrored his journey through life. Whether characterized by shadows, bright colors, lines, curves or never ending circles, he has shared his soul with us through its reflection on his canvas. His work reminds us that art is life and the best form of life is a work of art.

The BenCab Museum is located at Km. 6 Asin Road, Tadiangan, Tuba, Benguet. Visit www.bencabmuseum.org for more information.