

ART FULL-TIME

ArtLab, the Syjuco Art Family's Living Space and Werkstätte



Panoramic view of the Syjuco ArtLab from the third floor indoor veranda, showing the cathedral-like space of the main atrium. Cesare's bedroom is to the left, while the painting nooks of Cesare and Jean-Marie are on the right. Below is the main entrance and *sala* level devoted to Cesare's famed *Literary Hybrid* works.

Communal living among like-minded artists has a distinguished tradition.

Medieval monks toiled together in monasteries, writing and illuminating manuscripts. Artist-colonies sprang up in the 19th and early 20th centuries based on national styles, such as the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Arts and Crafts Movements. The Viennese Secession and *Werkstätte* Movements are of particular note as well, having brought the world paintings, jewelry, ceramics, and furniture of a distinct style and character. Perhaps the most famous is the German Bauhaus Movement from 1919 to 1933, where Modern masters like Wassily Kandinsky, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer lived and made art together in a campus environment, and taught master classes to aspiring artists.

A close approximation of the artists' colony in the contemporary Filipino sense can be found in a sedate and unobtrusive corner of Ayala Alabang. The ArtLab is the brainchild of the husband-and-wife artist team of Cesare A.X. Syjuco and Jean-Marie Ricafort-Syjuco. Originally founded in the old Syjuco compound along EDSA, Makati, in 1990, it was conceived as one of Manila's earliest artist-run spaces. Artworks were made in individual studios within ArtLab, and collaborative projects in visual art, music and theater were attempted, guided by the avant-garde aesthetics of the Syjuocos (Cesare being an inherently precocious writer and artist, and Jean-Marie a painter and performance artist).



Street entrance to the ArtLab. The brick-faced planters and rooms to the left side were designed to blend into the main house, BrightHouse, which is to the right of ArtLab. On the other hand, the whitewashed and glass-clad main section devotes views of the lot's arboreal richness to the indoors—Jean-Marie being a nature lover as well.

ArtLab is also a place for entertaining visitors and friends...highlighting the Syjuco's combined artistry.

Because of the nightmarish traffic at EDSA and the South Superhighway, the couple eventually moved ArtLab to their Alabang house, which they call BrightHouse. The need to bring up their children in the peace and quiet of Alabang, while working on their art, convinced the couple to stick within the village. A multiplication of talent ensued—their three eldest daughters, Maxine, Michelline and Trixie, and eldest son, AJ, are immersing themselves in the arts as well.

A separate set of studios where each Syjuco

family member can work in peace, while being just a few steps away from BrightHouse, thus became a necessity. In 2010, the Syjuco's bought the neighboring house standing on a 1,000-square meter property, and hired Architect Jae Narciso to transform it into their new ArtLab.

Narciso's plan was to follow in the footsteps of the construction of BrightHouse; namely, to "recycle" an existing house and limit structural changes, to keep waste at a minimum. "Cesare loves industrial materials," says Narciso.

Vestibule gallery of the ArtLab where visitors can stay before accessing the main rooms, dominated by an installation by Maxine called *The Tree Voices*, and one of Cesare's *Literary Hybrids*.





Main stairwell of the ArtLab, festooned with the surrealist works of Maxine and Cesare. The use of "museum white" tones creates a feeling of airiness, unity and cleanliness that defines the Modernist sensibility of the family. The steel tube and cable balustrades accent the industrial aesthetic of this Modernism.



The vestibule level toilet-bath, dominated by Jean-Marie's installation called *Dear Fukushima Daiichi*. The black tiled walls are a deliberate contrast to the predominantly white walls outside.

ArtLab has since served as the main studio spaces of Cesare, Jean-Marie and Maxine, with special exhibition rooms for Michelline and Trixie. The three-storey, Modernist barn-like structure houses exhibition spaces, painting studios, a guest room with a music studio and, just a few steps away, the "his-and-hers" painting studio nooks of the couple with a magnificent glass curtain view of the street in front. A bedroom suite for Cesare, complete with its own working studio and bath, is on the third floor. A rear-side annex faced in brick was also added to provide studio spaces for the three daughters, plus a separate painting and restoration studio for Jean-Marie.

Meant not only as an artistic studio, ArtLab is also a place for entertaining visitors and friends by providing each space with a marvelous series of works that highlight the Syjuco's combined artistry. The multiple interests of each family member were accorded their own special corners and walls. It is the guiding hand of Cesare, however, that coordinates and "conducts" these forces into a masterful symphony of contemporary art. Known for producing a wide range of highly conceptual works since the 70s, Cesare's *Literary Hybrids*, which he has been creating since 2005, are the mainstays of ArtLab's interior décor. Clever puns, reworked proverbs and rhetorical flourishes filled with irony, all printed on backlit acrylic panels with background graphics, enliven the main living and exhibition spaces and the whitewashed walls all the way up to the ceiling.

"The primary design objective (he) desired was to express the materials used as they are, to let the aluminum be aluminum, the brick, brick, the steel, steel." By pursuing this sustainable approach and expression of industrial material, ArtLab becomes the other half of BrightHouse, albeit a more pristine one owing to its whitewashed appearance.

Completed in February of this year, the Syjuco



The sala area next to the bar/kitchen featuring a medley of *Literary Hybrids*, classic Modernist chair designs by Philippe Starck and a Red Blue chair by Gerrit Rietveld (foreground), and part of Cesare's electric guitar collection.



The kitchen and bar corner on the second level, which continues the chic Modernist approach with its stainless steel barstools and fridge contrasted with a black-finished bar and kitchen countertop.

All these elements create a unifying effect: a kind of *haute moderne* sensibility rooted in European modern design and aesthetics.

Surreal and jarringly avant-garde, the *Literary Hybrids*' use of acrylic panels, black, white and red color contrasts, light boxes and elegant typography exemplify a new wave of Modernist mixed media installations (popularized by the American artist Barbara Kruger) that uses advertising and popular culture as its references. The ArtLab becomes a sort of high temple dedicated to this premise. Its clean lines and surfaces are reflected in the structure's predominant use of whitewashed walls, silver ceiling thermal shielding and the transparency of glass curtain walls. All these elements create a unifying effect: a kind of *haute moderne* sensibility

rooted in European modern design and aesthetics.

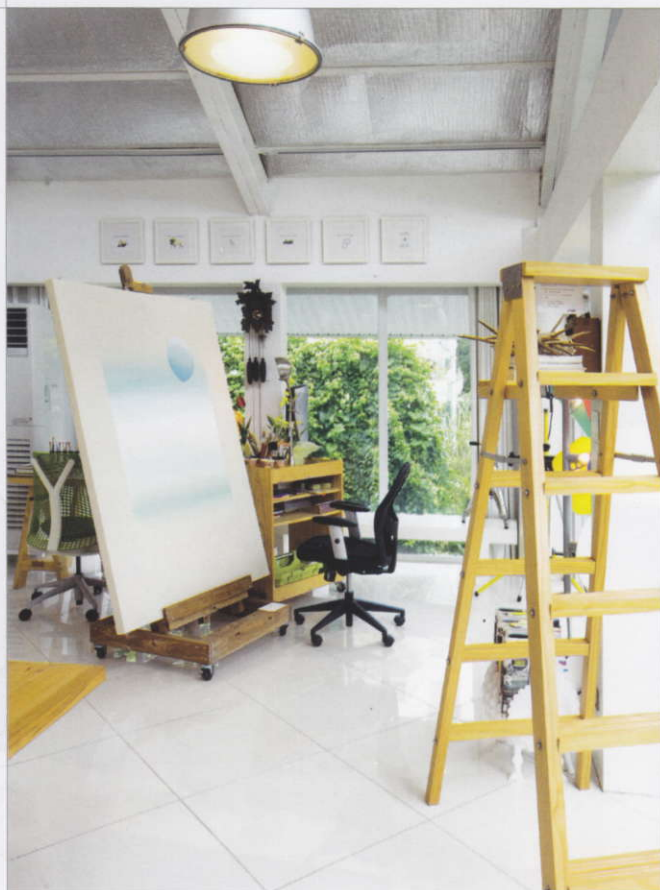
Diagonal levels in the main interior progress from the ground floor up to the third floor, creating a progression of spaces from where the *Literary Hybrids* can be best seen as one moves from one floor to another. Every movement or transition reveals different rooms that showcase the works of the other family members. This movement starts from the vestibule gallery, where a large tree installation by Maxine stands tall and is surrounded by more of Cesare's and Jean-Marie's work. This gallery then branches out to a display room dedicated to Michelline's handmade jewelry.



The second floor main display area next to the sala overlooking the atrium, with

Cesare's light-filled painting nook at the second level, which overlooks the street outside thanks to its floor-to-ceiling curtain glass windows.





Jean-Marie's painting nook at the second level. Green is her favorite color, so she positions her stool to overlook the flowering vines outside that lead to BrightHouse.



Cesare's bedroom-studio on the third level. In here, he can work on his latest easel-sized works focusing on black and white abstractions.



Maxine's private studio in the annex building, with her worktable on the left, and numerous finished works in painting, graphics, and photography on the right that share space with her favorite meditation chair as well as seating for private tutorial students from the neighborhood.

Even the public toilet nearby houses one of Jean-Marie's installations.

At the second floor *sala* and kitchen, seats reproduced from classic Modern designs and genuine Philippe Starck chairs intermingle

with Cesare's music equipment, his *Literary Hybrids* and Jean-Marie and Trixie's permanent video installations. Finally, the third floor bedroom studio of Cesare climaxes the movement from the hybrids to his recent

abstract paintings in black and white.

With occasional art students being coached by Maxine, and the ongoing documentation of older works by Cesare and Jean-Marie, it is no small wonder that ArtLab

attracts attention for being both domicile and art "workspace." Domestic living and a full-time occupation of making art for this family, after all, is its central bond, and the reason for ArtLab's longevity. ■