AN ARTIST'S BOOK

VOL. 01

OIL PAINTINGS · 2015—2017

FRAGIL

An ongoing study of the fragile human heart and the fragile human mind — portraits painted in oil, in Hong Kong, over three years.

BY

Justo D. Cascante III

YEARS

2015 — 2017

AN ARTIST'S MONOGRAPH

FRAGILE

Oil Paintings, 2015—2017

Justo D. Cascante III

HONG KONG · MANILA

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SECTION I

Foreword

A long, indirect conversation about the paintings and what they propose.

A Long, Indirect Conversation

These paintings began as portraits and refused to remain them. Between 2015 and 2017, in a small studio in Hong Kong, Justo D. Cascante III set out to study the people around him — a sister, a friend, a stranger met once and remembered for years — and what arrived on the canvases was something less stable and more honest than likeness. The figures that emerged from the oil are recognizable, then half-recognized, then dissolve into the texture of the paint itself, only to re-form a moment later as a cheek, a collarbone, the downward cast of an eye. To stand in front of them is to participate in this dissolution and reassembly.

The series takes its name from a single word — *fragile* — that the artist returns to in conversation, in his statement, and in the titles and texture of the work. Fragility here is not weakness. It is a way of being in the world that admits the possibility of being changed by what one looks at. The heart is fragile because it can be moved. The mind is fragile because it can be rearranged. The portrait is fragile because, in the act of painting it, both the painter and the sitter are unmade a little, and remade a little, and the canvas remembers the unmaking.

Cascante's route to this fragility has been long and not at all straight. He trained as a painter in Manila, worked as a storyboard artist for independent film, sculpted, did prosthetic makeup for film and television, and in 1992 moved to Hong Kong, where he has lived and worked since. His paintings carry the residue of all these trades: the narrative sense of the storyboard, the three-dimensional thinking of the sculptor, the bodily uncanniness of prosthetics. They are paintings that know about bodies because their maker has built bodies from other materials and watched them move under lights.

The works gathered here were made across three years and were recognized in 2017 with the Hong Kong winner of the Cliftons Art Prize for the painting *Fanny*. They have already lived several lives — in studios, in competitions, in private collections — but they have not yet been seen together as a body of work. This book is a first attempt to do that.

It collects the paintings, the artist's own words about them, a longer critical essay on the ideas they raise, and the biographical record that situates them. It is offered not as a closing statement but as an opening one: a way to look at what has been made, and a way to imagine what may still come.

Throughout the book, three voices are present. The artist speaks in his statement and in the commentaries that accompany each plate. A critical essay, written for this volume, frames the work from outside. And the paintings themselves — quiet, contradictory, refusing to settle — carry the third voice, the one that no statement and no essay can fully translate. The book is designed so that these three voices stay in productive tension. The reader is invited to listen, and to disagree.

SECTION II



Artist's Statement

What the painting suggests — in the artist's own words.

II ARTIST'S STATEMENT

What the Painting Suggests

"One does not imitate appearances, the appearance is the result."

— GEORGES BRAQUE

When I begin a painting I do not begin with an idea. I begin with a person — someone I have seen, someone I have known, someone whose face returns to me at hours I cannot predict. The canvas is blank and the person is not there, and what I do between those two facts is not imitation. It is a long, indirect conversation with a surface that resists and yields, resists and yields, until something begins to look back. Braque's sentence has been a companion for years. The appearance, when it comes, is not something I imposed. It is what the painting, after many sittings, finally agreed to.

PORTRAITS

These are not portraits the way a photograph is a portrait. A photograph freezes time. These paintings are an ongoing study — an attempt to watch, over many weeks and many layers, how a fragile human heart and a fragile human mind reveal themselves in a face, in the set of a mouth, in the shadow under an eye. I am not trying to fix anyone. I am trying to keep looking.

The work is also a reflection of where I am. My environment, my culture, the cultures I have lived between — Manila where I was born, Hong Kong where I have lived since 1992, the cultures inherited from parents and the cultures acquired by time. People displacement, mixed culture by time, mixed culture by blood — these are not subjects I have chosen. They are the conditions under which I see anyone. Every face I paint is filtered through this double vision, and every painting is partly a self-portrait, even when it is supposed to be someone else.

There is no guide and no formula. I have never had one and I do not want one. There is only the patient practice of perfecting certain lines and certain shades, and the willingness to start over when the line is wrong. The narrative, when one appears, is just an automation from an experience. Time was never a concern. Time, in the studio, is infinite.

CONFLICT AND UNCERTAINTY

Emotional conflict defines the energy of the work during the process. There is a continuous, indirect dialogue between myself and the painting — second by second, layer by layer — and the dialogue is rarely calm. The painting argues. I argue back. The painting changes its mind. I change mine. Out of this argument, if I am honest and patient, something begins to cohere.

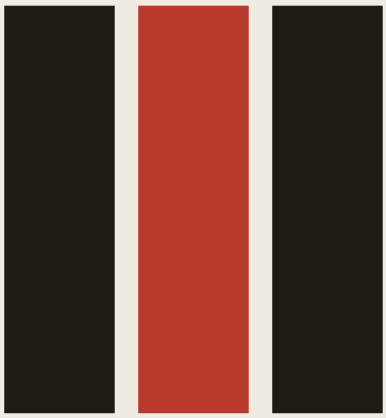
What interests me is uncertainty — not only the uncertainty of changing an idea, but the deeper uncertainty of the painting beginning to reveal things I did not put there. A mouth I did not paint opens. A figure I did not plan appears at the edge of the canvas. The painting begins to suggest, and my work is to listen to the suggestion without crushing it. At this moment I want the work to be as close to figurative as I can manage — as close to human as I can manage — because the human figure is the most demanding test of this listening. But I would love, in the near future, to let it go further.

INSPIRATION

Cecily Brown once said: "Keep it very open. Let the painting lead you, or take what the painting suggests." That sentence has been a guide. Though my work starts as figurative, it can go on to be free in terms of form. Some specific images remain — a face, a hand, the angle of a shoulder — but they are there only to let the viewer enter the work and make their own narrative. The figure is a point of departure. On the contrary, in the end, the painting is also an abstract.

The core of the original impulse is to be found in the work itself, not in any story I tell about it. The entirety of the process is the same: trying to discover the unknown. What I write here, in this statement, is only a shadow of what the paintings know. Read it as a shadow. Then look at the paintings.

SECTION III



On Fragility

A critical essay on the series, its method, and its proposal.

III CRITICAL ESSAY

On Fragility

A READING OF THE FRAGILE SERIES, 2015—2017

Fragility, in Justo Cascante's paintings, is not a subject. It is a method. The works in this series — Fanny, Amy, Mary Jane, Panic, Jade, Self Portrait, Undecided, Unfinish, the small diptych Fons et origo, and the still-untitled canvas that closes the body of work — are not paintings *about* fragile people. They are paintings made by treating every brushstroke as something that could break the painting, and every decision as something that might have to be unmade. The fragility lives in the surface, in the layers of revision visible underneath the final image, in the way a cheek will resolve and then dissolve again as the viewer moves across the canvas. To call these portraits is to name only the most accessible of their effects.

The word *portrait* carries a weight of likeness and stability that the paintings deliberately refuse. A portrait, in the classical sense, fixes a sitter in time and asserts that this is how they looked, here, in this light, on this day. Cascante's paintings do the opposite. They record the act of looking, not the fact of being looked at. The faces in them are not still. They hover at the edge of recognition — a sister's jaw, a friend's downcast eye, the artist's own mouth seen in a mirror — and then they slide back into paint. The viewer is never allowed to forget that what they are seeing is oil on canvas, made by a hand, over weeks. The likeness is always provisional. The appearance, to borrow Braque's term, is always a result, never a starting point.

> *The figure is a point of departure. On the contrary, in the end, the painting is also an abstract.*

This refusal to settle is what links the paintings to the longer tradition of figurative abstraction that runs from Willem de Kooning through Cecily Brown, whom Cascante cites directly. Brown's advice — "keep it very open, let the painting lead you" — is not a

stylistic preference but an epistemological one. It asserts that the painting knows something the painter does not, and that the painter's task is to listen rather than to declare. Cascante's paintings are made in this listening posture. They are full of marks that look like corrections, scrapes that look like second thoughts, layers that look like the painter changing his mind in real time. None of this is accident. All of it is the visible trace of a method that puts uncertainty at the center of the work.

THE INDIRECT DIALOGUE

Cascante describes his process as a "continuous, indirect dialogue" with the painting. The word *indirect* is important. The dialogue is not with the sitter — the sitter is usually not present — and not with an imagined viewer. It is with the painting itself, treated as a quasi-autonomous entity that resists, yields, and suggests. This is a mystic-sounding claim, but it has a concrete studio meaning: when a painter works on a canvas for many weeks, the canvas accumulates decisions that the painter did not consciously make. A brushstroke placed to fix one area changes the weight of another. A color scraped off leaves a ghost that informs the next color put down. The painting, by the time it is half-finished, knows more about itself than the painter does, and the rest of the work is the slow process of catching up.

This is why the paintings look the way they do. The faces are not smooth because they were never smooth — they were built up and scraped back, built up and scraped back, until the final image is the latest settlement in a long argument. The backgrounds are not empty because no ground was ever truly empty — they are dense with the memory of figures that were there and were removed. Even the dimensions of the canvases — most of them large, around 31 × 47 inches, with a few outliers — reflect this method. A small canvas demands resolution. A large one tolerates, even invites, prolonged uncertainty.

DISPLACEMENT AND MIXED CULTURE

The biographical fact that grounds all of this is displacement. Cascante was born in Manila, trained there as a painter, and has lived in Hong Kong since 1992. He has, by his own account, been between cultures for the whole of his adult life — Filipino by birth and formation, Hong Kong by adoption and daily practice, and an artist whose work has been shown in both places without ever quite belonging to either. This betweenness is not a theme he illustrates. It is the condition under which he sees.

A face seen between two cultures is a face seen twice. The first look recognizes it as a person; the second look recognizes it as a stranger, or as a version of oneself, or as both

at once. The faces in these paintings carry that doubleness. They are intimate — often relatives, friends, the artist himself — and they are also at a distance, viewed as if across a room or a sea. The portrait of *Fanny*, which won the Hong Kong Cliftons Art Prize in 2017, is the clearest example: a sister or friend, painted at full length, with a tenderness that does not resolve into sentimentality, and a strangeness that does not resolve into alienation. The painting holds both. The viewer is asked to hold both.

> *The figure is only a point of departure. On the contrary, in the end it is also an abstract.*

FIGURATIVE AND ABSTRACT

The paintings sit at a particular point on the spectrum between figurative and abstract, and they sit there by conviction rather than indecision. Cascante has said that he wants, at this moment, to be "as close to figurative, as close to human" as he can manage, while leaving open the possibility of moving further toward abstraction in the future. This is not hedging. It is a precise calibration of where the work needs to be right now to do what it needs to do. The figure has to be there because the figure is what gives the viewer a way in. The abstraction has to be there because the abstraction is what prevents the figure from becoming illustration. The tension between the two is the work.

It is also what makes the paintings hard to reproduce. A small image of *Panic* or *Mary Jane* reads as a portrait, more or less distorted. The actual painting, at 31 × 47 inches, reads as something else: a field of marks that has a face in it, a surface that is also a body, an abstract painting that refuses to stop being a person. The catalogue reproductions in this book can only point at this effect. They cannot reproduce it. The invitation is to take the book as an introduction, and to seek out the paintings themselves.

WHAT THE SERIES PROPOSES

Read together, the works in Fragile propose a particular understanding of what a portrait can be in the early twenty-first century. Not a record of a person, but a record of the act of looking at a person. Not a fixing of identity, but a refusal to fix it. Not a celebration of the sitter, but a serious, prolonged, uncertain inquiry into what it means to be looked at, and what it means to look. The proposal is humble in its language and ambitious in its execution. It asks for slow looking. It rewards return visits. It does not conclude.

The series is, by the artist's own account, ongoing. The paintings made between 2015 and 2017 are the first installment of a longer project that may move further into abstraction, may take up drawing or video alongside painting, and may continue to circle the

same small set of concerns — fragility, conflict, uncertainty, the indirect dialogue — for years. This book is a way of marking the first chapter. It is not a closing. It is a pause, a looking back, and an opening onto whatever comes next.

SECTION IV

IV

Plates

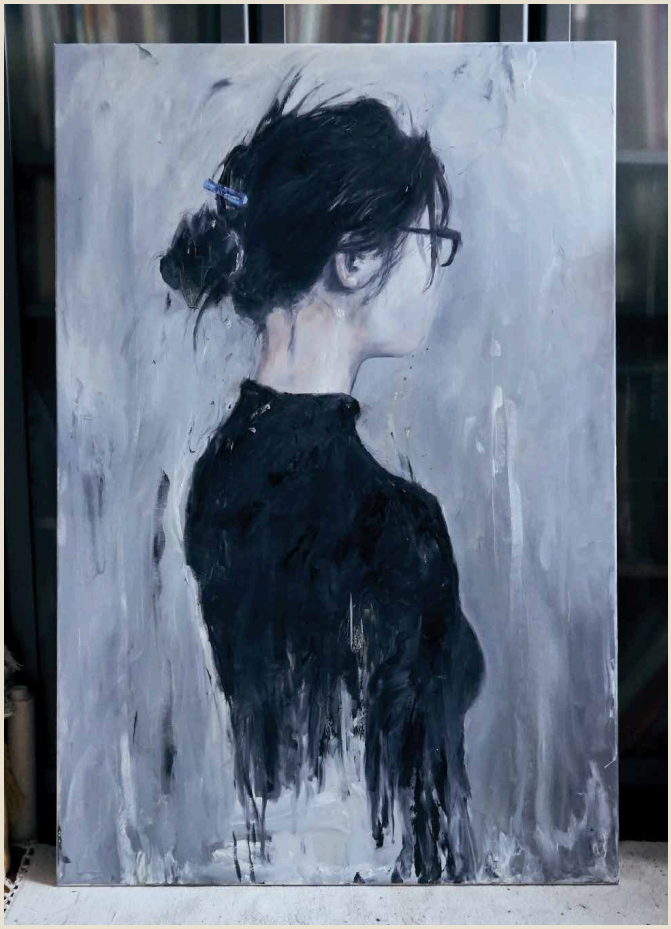
The paintings of the Fragile series, 2015—2017.

IV PLATES

The Paintings

The following pages present the paintings of the Fragile series in the order of their making, so far as that order can be reconstructed. Each plate carries the work's title, year, medium, and dimensions, followed by a short commentary. The commentaries are not exhaustive. They are intended as one way in.

Fanny



YEAR

2017

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

31 1/2 × 47 1/4 inches

RECOGNITION

Hong Kong Winner, Cliftons Art Prize 2017

The painting that opens the series and the painting that, so far, has traveled furthest. *Fanny* was recognized with the Hong Kong winner of the 2017 Cliftons Art Prize and now lives in the Cliftons collection. A full-length portrait, it sets the terms for everything that follows: a figure at once present and dissolving, a face that refuses to settle into a single expression, a surface dense with the marks of revision. The painting is tender without being soft, and uncertain without being vague. It is the clearest statement of method in the body of work.

Fons et origo



YEAR

2015—2017

FORMAT

Diptych, oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

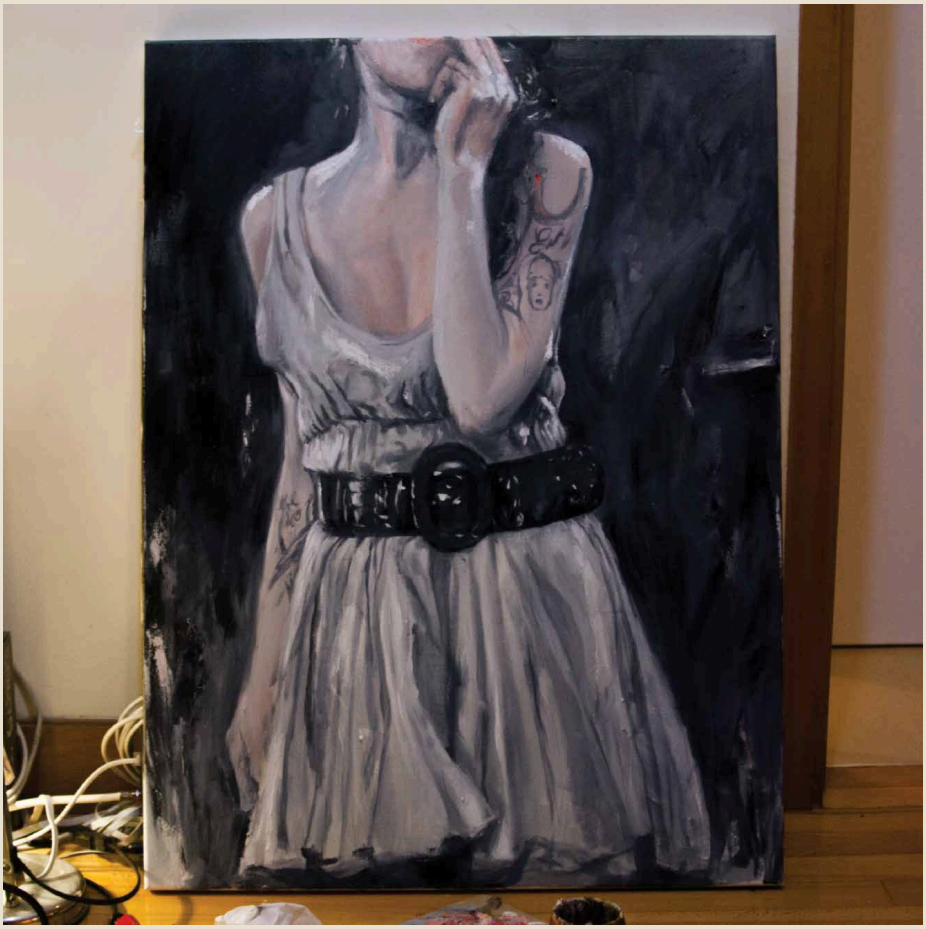
10 × 10 inches (each panel)

SOURCE OF THE TITLE

Latin: "Source and origin"

The smallest work in the series and, in many ways, the most concentrated. *Fons et origo* — Latin for "source and origin" — is a diptych in two ten-inch panels, painted across the full span of the series. Where the larger canvases expand the method, this one compresses it: the same indirect dialogue, the same figurative-ab tension, carried out at the size of a book page. It is, in a sense, the series in miniature — a meditation on where the work comes from, and a quiet statement that the source is not a single moment but a continuing one.

Amy



YEAR

2016

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

23 1/2 × 31 1/2 inches

NOTES

Mid-series portrait

A portrait made in the middle of the series, smaller in scale than the major canvases and more intimate in tone. *Amy* demonstrates the range Cascante maintains within a single body of work: the same method, applied to a smaller field, produces a different temperature. The figure is closer to the viewer, the background less insistent, the dissolution less dramatic — but the underlying structure is the same. The face is built and unbuilt in the same patient argument with the surface.

Mary Jane



YEAR

2016

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

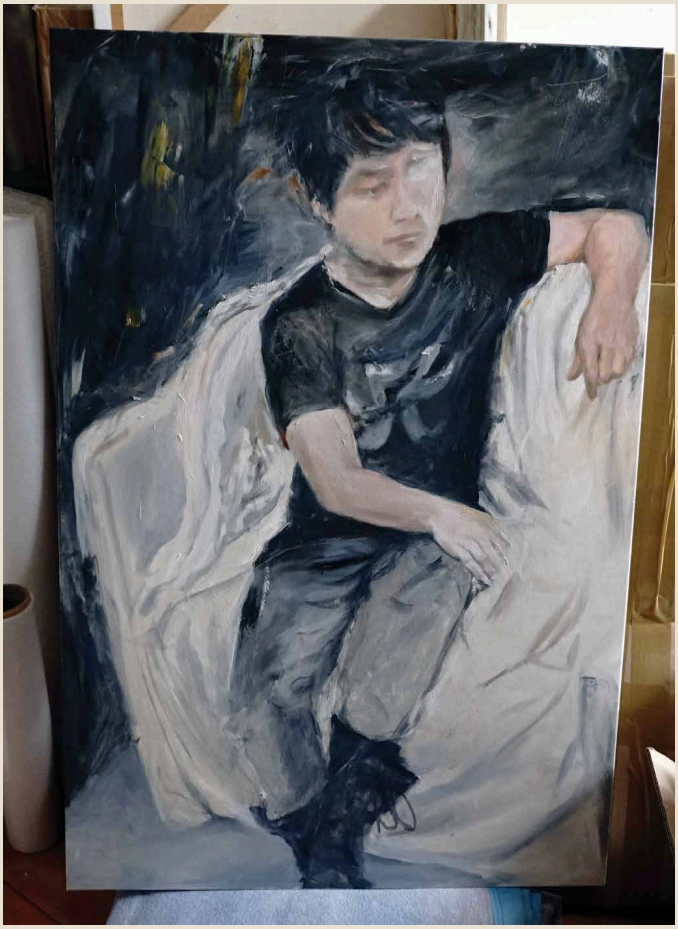
39 × 39 inches

FORMAT

Square

A square canvas, and the only one in the series at this proportion. The square changes the painting. It removes the directional bias of the rectangle — the implicit narrative of left-to-right or top-to-bottom — and forces the figure to occupy the center of attention without the relief of horizontal expanse. *Mary Jane* is, as a result, one of the most direct confrontations in the series: the sitter and the viewer face each other with nothing to either side, and the painting has to succeed or fail in the strict encounter between them.

Self Portrait



YEAR

2017

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

31 1/2 × 47 inches

NOTES

The painter as sitter

If every portrait in the series is partly a self-portrait, this one is fully so — and it is also the most unforgiving. Painting oneself means looking without the mercy of distance, and the painting records that severity. The figure is at once the most recognizable in the series and the most unstable, as if the painter, freed from the obligation to render someone else, allowed himself to push the method further than he otherwise would. The result is a portrait that is also a treatise on what it is to look at oneself.

Jade (detail)



YEAR

2016

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

31 1/2 × 31 1/2 inches

SHOWN

Detail

Reproduced here as a detail, *Jade* is one of the most quietly insistent works in the series. The cropping in this reproduction is not a compromise — it is a way of looking that the painting itself invites. The full canvas operates at the scale of a face encountered close to; the detail moves the viewer closer still, into the territory where paint and skin become hard to tell apart. It is at this distance that the method becomes most visible: every mark a decision, every decision a small risk.

Panic



YEAR

2016

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

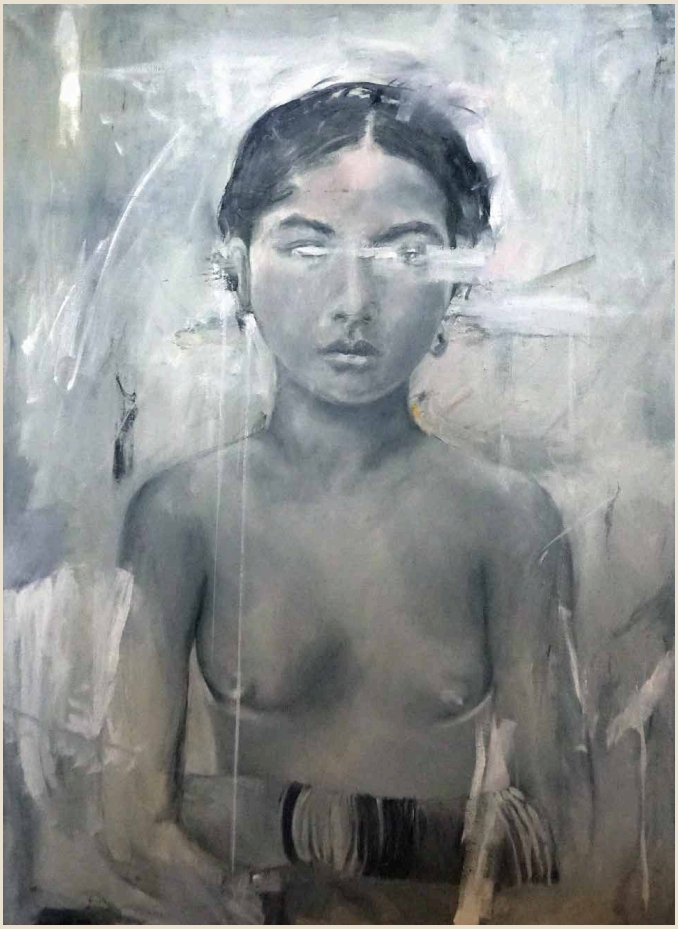
31 1/2 × 47 1/4 inches

TONE

Most charged

The most emotionally charged of the major canvases, and the one where the method of conflict becomes most visible. *Panic* is not an illustration of panic — it is a painting made in a state of sustained emotional conflict, and the surface carries the trace of that state. The figure is barely held together by the act of painting, and the painting itself is barely held together by the act of looking. It is the work in the series that most directly earns its title, and the one that most clearly demonstrates what Cascante means when he speaks of emotional conflict as the energy of the work.

No title yet



YEAR

2016—2017

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

27 × 35 inches

STATUS

In progress

A painting that, at the time of this book, has not yet been named. The absence of a title is not an oversight. It is a state — the state of a work that the painter has not yet finished arguing with, that has not yet told him what it is. *No title yet* is included here as a deliberate refusal to close the series, a reminder that the body of work is not a closed set but a living one, and that the next painting may already be in the studio, waiting to be recognized.

Undecided



YEAR

2017

MEDIUM

Oil on linen

DIMENSIONS

18 × 24 inches

NOTES

Smaller support, linen

A smaller painting on linen — a departure from the canvas supports used elsewhere in the series — and one of the most frankly titled. *Undecided* owns its uncertainty as a permanent condition rather than a temporary one. The linen surface gives the paint a different character than canvas does: more absorbent, more intimate, less given to the buildup of layers. The painting is, in consequence, more direct, less revised, and offers a glimpse of what the method looks like when the surface itself resists revision.

Unfinish (detail)



YEAR

2017

MEDIUM

Oil on canvas

DIMENSIONS

48 × 48 inches

SHOWN

Detail

The largest painting in the series and the one whose title is also a statement of method. *Unfinish* — the noun, not the verb — names the condition of a work that resists the very idea of completion. At forty-eight inches square it is the size of a small mural, and its scale allows the method to expand to its full amplitude: the figure, the dissolution, the indirect dialogue, all carried out across a surface large enough that the viewer can step into it. Reproduced here as a detail, the painting in person is an environment as much as an image. It is the most ambitious statement in the series, and the one that most clearly points forward to what may come next.

SECTION V

V

Biography

Justo D. Cascante III — Manila, Hong Kong, and the work between.

Justo D. Cascante III

Justo D. Cascante III was born in Manila, Philippines, where he took his Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in painting, at the Philippine Women's University. He has been based in Hong Kong since 1992. His practice as a painter is grounded in a long apprenticeship across several disciplines — storyboarding for independent film, sculpture, and prosthetic makeup effects for film and television — and the paintings he makes today carry the residue of all of them: a narrative sense of sequence, a sculptor's understanding of volume, and a makeup artist's intimacy with the human face under light.

The trajectory from Manila to Hong Kong was not a single move but a relocation of practice. In Manila, Cascante trained as a painter and exhibited from his student years, winning recognition at the Third Asean Youth Painting Competition in 1984 (First Place) and at the Metrobank and Titanium competitions in the years that followed. He was, in those years, a Filipino painter working in a Filipino art scene. The move to Hong Kong in 1992 — undertaken, as he puts it, to continue his creative endeavor — placed him in a different and more complicated position: an artist between two cities, two languages, two art publics, neither of which could fully claim him and neither of which he could fully leave.

This betweenness is not a subject he illustrates in his work. It is the condition under which he sees. The paintings he has made in Hong Kong — and the Fragile series in particular — are full of faces seen across this double vision: intimate and at a distance, recognizable and strange. The work has been recognized in both places. In Manila, he has shown at the Hiraya Gallery, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, John Batten Gallery in Hong Kong, the Osage Soho, the Fringe, PMQ, and Art Galileia; in Hong Kong, he was the Hong Kong winner of the Cliftons Art Prize in 2017 for the painting *Fanny*, and was shortlisted for the Hong Kong Human Rights Arts Prize in 2014. The submitted works in both cases turned on the same set of concerns that organize the Fragile series: the

fragility of the human heart and the human mind, conflict, uncertainty, obsession, and what the artist calls "secretly desired state ideas."

The Fragile series, made between 2015 and 2017, is the most concentrated body of work Cascante has produced to date. It is, by his own account, the beginning of a longer project that may move further into abstraction, take up drawing or video alongside painting, and continue to circle the same concerns for years. He lives and works in Hong Kong.

SECTION VI

VI

Curriculum Vitae

Solo exhibitions, selected group shows, and awards.

VI · A SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Solo Exhibitions

Neutral	**HW|LAC PMQ, S504 Block A** Central, Hong Kong · Aug 21—23, 2015
New Works	**3 Boxes, 35 Graham Street** Central, Hong Kong · Jul 15 — Aug 4, 2006
Mga Kwentong Bata At Iba Pa (Children's Stories and Others) — **Third Solo Show**	**Greenhouse Gallery, Botanical Garden** Baguio City, Philippines · Apr 16 — May 28, 2002
Light In A Box — **Second Solo Show**	**John Batten Gallery** Hong Kong · June 1998
Si Hala at si Inbisibol Man ("Hala" and the Invisible Man) — **First Solo Show**	**Hiraya Gallery** Manila · April 1997

VI · B CV — GROUP

Selected Group Exhibitions

TWENTY-NINE GROUP EXHIBITIONS IN TOTAL. LISTED BELOW ARE THE ARTIST'S SELECTIONS.

You're nothing but an overrated, trying hard Hong Kong art rat!	**Art Galileia** Manila · May 21 — Jun 02, 2016
Impetus 1: Reflex at Play — a three-part series	**NOW Gallery + Auctions** Pasong Tamo, Makati City · Feb 13, 2014
Chronicled Pain Colored — painting exhibition with three artists	**Osage Soho** Hong Kong · Jun 6, 2008
Drawing on Square — drawing exhibition by eight Hong Kong artists	**The Fringe** Hong Kong · Jun 23 — Jul 3, 2007
Culture in Motion: The Philippines — five Hong Kong–based Filipino artists, sponsored by the HK Home Affairs Bureau	**Chater Road** Hong Kong · Feb 20, 2005
Bundles on Paper — works on paper, twenty-five international artists	**John Batten Gallery** Hong Kong · 1998
Traveling Around — works of eleven artists inspired by travel	**John Batten Gallery** Hong Kong · Aug 3 — 27, 1999
Puna at Pananaw (Views and Visions) — multi-media collective by the HULO artist group, eight members	**Hiraya Gallery** Manila · Sep 20 — Oct 2, 1997
Rapid Reflection — a two-man show with Joel Ferraris	**John Batten Gallery** Hong Kong · Aug 25 — Sep 6, 1997
Encore — group show of past winners, Third Asean Youth Exhibition	**Small Gallery, Cultural Center of the Philippines** Manila · 1986
Young Art Group Show	**Main Gallery, Cultural Center of the Philippines** Manila · 1986
Third Asean Youth Painting Exhibition	**Indonesia Institute of Arts** Yogyakarta, Indonesia · Nov 1985

Biennial Exhibition of UNESCO

Main Gallery, Cultural Center of the Philippines
Manila · 1984

VI · C **CV — AWARDS**

Awards & Recognitions

Hong Kong Winner — *Cliftons Art Prize*
For "Fanny"
Hong Kong · 2017

Finalist — *Cliftons Art Prize*
Hong Kong · 2017

Shortlisted — *The Hong Kong Human Rights Arts Prize*
Hong Kong · 2014

Titanium Painting Competition — One of three Grand Prizes
Manila · Nov 1989

Metrobank 25th Anniversary Painting Competition — Top 10
Manila · Sep 1987

Student Awardee of Fine Arts — for representing PWU in a major competition
Manila · 1986

Third Asean Youth Painting Competition — First Place
1984

First Metrobank Painting Competition — Top 100, Honorable Mention
Manila · Oct 1984

KKK Drawing and Painting Competition — Finalist
1981

Charcoal Drawing Contest, University of Life, Manila — 4th Honorable Mention

Manila · 1981

COLOPHON & CONTACT

End Matter

This book was assembled from the artist's own proposal document and statements, the record of his exhibitions and awards, and a critical essay commissioned for this volume. The text has been rewritten and expanded throughout. The paintings are reproduced from the artist's own image archive; the catalogue is intended as an introduction to the work and not as a substitute for seeing the paintings in person.

ARTIST

Justo D. Cascante III

BASED IN

Hong Kong, since 1992

EMAIL

justocascante@gmail.com

PHONE

+852 9750 5761

WEBSITE

justocascante.com

SERIES

Fragile, 2015—2017

. . .

The series is ongoing. The next painting is in the studio.

HONG KONG · 2026