



LAURA MORTON / SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Artist Rupert Garcia.

## Finding healing through the creative process

By Carey Sweet

It was cruel timing that shortly after artist Rupert Garcia was awarded his installation commission for Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center in 2009, he was diagnosed with a grave illness.

Yet as he labored through treatment, and eventual recovery, he found that the gamut of emotions he was experiencing

added incredible depth and an emotional layer to his work.

"It gave me new appreciation for what hospitals are, and should be," he said. "There's very serious business going on here, so I wanted to create an inviting environment filled with vitality, color and hope."

Standing in the lobby — literally on top of one of his pieces — a dramatic travertine floor inlay that explodes in

brilliant rivers of teal, cerulean, apricot and rich raspberry — he glows now, his eyes framed by large, fashionably round glasses.

Boasting commissions at prominent projects like the San Francisco International Airport and at Oakland's Elihu M. Harris State Office Building, a biography that spans a dozen pages of international shows and awards. This was Garcia's

first project for a public hospital. As the anchor of an array of other artist creations spanning nearly every nook and cranny of the 484,000-square-foot facility, his pieces frame the entire lobby, from the terrazzo floor, to two massive mosaic pieces, one above the reception area and the other dominating the landing of an adjacent, glass and steel staircase.

The theme is flowers — instantly recognizable in the impressionist, tulip-reminiscent installation over the reception desk — yet only revealed after studying the two-story, enormous checkerboard panel staircase abstract, and the long petal designs flowing across the floor across what Garcia calls "an ocean of tranquility."

"I've always loved flowers," the San Francisco Bay Area-

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*Rupert Garcia*

based artist said. "Growing up in Stockton, my mother grew roses and carnations. Flowers hold such potential symbolism in their colors, shape, blooming, withering and rejuvenation."

Above the highly polished, nearly glass-like floor, the mosaics draw the eye upward to soaring multi-level ceilings, and frameworks of tall windows reaching toward the sky.

Stepping on the shimmering floor feels a bit like floating, as if a guest might fly above the space like a bird.

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Indeed, flooded with natural light against the stimulating color and virtual motion of the pieces, the lobby does its remarkable job of making the patients, providers, nurses, staff and visitors feel impossibly free.

"There's a relationship between nature and healing illnesses and an ancient and contemporary connection to alleviate sickness," the artist said. "This association is my conceptual and symbolic motif."

Even those colors have special meaning for their very special place, he explained. Each floor of the hospital is designated by a unique San Francisco icon and vibrant color. When Garcia discovered that, he knew his palette had been decreed.

"But since we go to the hospital to cure or mitigate our infirmities, why shouldn't the point of entry be part of the treatment, too?" he mused. "I hope the lobby, and my art, can be experienced as an encouraging part of the healing process."



PHOTO BY ARLA ESCONTRIAS

The hospital interweaves art throughout the building, including artist Rupert Garcia's pieces in the lobby.