

Institute Plastic Arts STUDENT SHOW

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

It was a pleasure to see the sculptures, graphics and some of the paintings at the annual student show of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture School of Plastic Arts, at the Dominican Convent in Old San Juan. An elder of the tribe loves to see the shape the world will be in after he is gone.

An overview of the show tells me Puerto Rican art in the future will keep on being very eclectic, never wild, always sedate, careful in execution, cagey in design and exposition, helter-skelter in its exhibition, and with never an adequate catalogue. Even a mimeographed catalogue with alphabetical listings would be welcome, as it would be at University of Puerto Rico (Rio Piedras) exhibits.

The show is a definite experience in the now. I doubt that any art school in the world with a similar number of students could present as good a sculpture show as the present one. Sculpting is more work than painting. So I must congratulate both Tomas Batista and Rafael Lopez del Campo, the sculpture instructors. Their example must be catching.

Maybe we are going beyond pictorials and graphics and into three per cent dimensional space. High time. Three-dimensional space is where we can choke, where the population expands, where the action is. If we choke as a people at least we will leave monuments behind. Paintings disappear, what with the elements and the polilla. Stone and bronze endure. That's what I read in this show. We are getting ready for a monumental something in the 21st Century.

Carlos Torres Cruz, Adelino Gonzalez and Maria A. Garcia are advanced sculpture students. Their work shows steady growth. (Adelino and Mari were left off the printed catalogue list, which also happens to other artists I shall mention). Maybe, as students will, everlastingly, they came in late and the hangers of the show, as usual, were ay-bendito-soft. Much as in the UPR student exhibits.

Of the three, Carlos Torres Cruz shows the most vigorous work, mostly metal constructions with Pablo Gargallo and Julio Gonzalez and other influences. It is nice to see positive volumens turn into negative voids which act positively to reconstruct the whole positive figure before us. Some metal details, however, are anecdotic, added for cute reasons, not to resolve formal needs.

Most metal ensemblage works even in museums have this built-in malady, a case where more is less in art. Lopez del Campo should fight this inherent whimsical cuteness in his students' work. A bolt, spring, or gear too many, soldered into the work, is a destructor of form's dignity. Witness the "Girl's Head" by Torres Cruz, with its distracting outside wires.

"Nilda" and "Dancer," both large constructions by Torres Cruz, capture alert movement and pose but "Nilda" is heavy of buttocks and haunch, unnecessarily, and the "Dancer" is tied to clumsy short legs tied to the ground. A pelican, Betances and

another portrait head by Torres are soft works. He does better at metal constructions. His "Lluvia de Enero" concept is too anecdotic a title for sculpture, brings out the merely whimsical details of the form, forgets the underlying architecture, which is fine enough.

By far the best work by Torres is his small "Grandmother." Quite an ancestral figure exposed entrails, within a very austere outer shape. But the work is spoiled by the two weak hands. I am beginning to suspect weak or absent hands are far too current in Puerto Rican art, as if we had an idiotic castration and anti-masturbation guilt complex induced by ancestral Oedipic fixations.

Two excellent modelled studies from life by Maria Antonia Garcia, one of them with a beautiful very expressively realized face, plus a reasonable study by Miguel Angel Charriez and another by Jose Baez Busquets, demonstrate their adeptness at copying nature's shapes. But their works are clumsy since most models in life are clumsy of proportion. A deep search for the style of such serene classical masters as Maillol and Despiau, or the old Egyptians, or even of such a metal construction as the "Monserrat" by Julio Gonzalez should help them levitate the fleshy matter into more buoyant forms.

A search for good sculptured style is the ultimate goal of a student. It isn't easy. Notice how M.A. Charriez stylized his "Frog" and flopped.

An extreme case is that of Adelino Gonzalez, who has too many styles, none quite definite. He started with a nicely carved simple head of his father in wood. The face is quite realistic but a stylizing desire is sensed in the parallel hairs on the head. His two fossil-stone carvings wittily expose the fossils with the least possible work on his part. "Margee-Goodby" is an expressive Bronx cheer against somebody, by somebody with cat's ears. His economical "Niptero II," a handsome object, allows the fossils to act as whitish writings against the black, abstract-semi-triangular shape. Then in still another style of whimsical metal construction his "Kiss on a Yellow Space" is a curious though elegant obelisk design.

Further on Gonzalez carves in wood lettristic V-shapes to cutely suggest "Vanessa's no. 1" portrait, plus a tall slim O-shape to suggest "Sarha." Metal additions to the wood bring nothing but themselves to the works. Unfortunately, in the hanging of the show the two works were put close together on one stand forming an Alberto V-O-5 shampoo advertisement, which is not his fault.

To sum up Gonzalez's career so far, he hasn't gone deeply into any of the styles; he skims on the surface and produces witty even handsome objects which will be conversation pieces in somebody's home. But what is his style? He has to probe in depth. His stylizing desire will never leave him, so he should dare to do pieces not for stylish fun but for grim penetration into the mysteries of

sculpture. Sculpture is so damned silent as a muse. He should try to hear it talk to him. It will, eventually, unless he goes for style only, not substance.

Other metal constructions are two owls by Maria A. Rodriguez, flat and front facing in sculptural conception, and a rhythmic yet austere and solid "v" structure by Alwyn Rivera Lopez.

Next to the sculptures in quality are the graphic works. They are better than the works by the professional Spaniards sent to us not so long ago, an exhibit which prompted me to exclaim that we should now colonize Spain. They need new blood in graphics over there.

Two serigraphs stand out in the student show and I can see why Lorenzo Homar, the instructor, was proud of them on a previous occasion this year, one of them is "Spatial Composition" by Hector Escalante with first rate composition, color and execution. It plays with both plastic space as such, plus with space as resolved by Renaissance lineal perspective. The other is "Fachadas" by Roberto Chao Fodere, a luminous combination of smooth and granular textures in a simplistic composition which is made theatrical by the black background given to it.

All the lithographs I saw were crisply drawn and nicely granulated in texture, plus reasonably well composed. But they limited themselves compositionally and tonally. A four or five value tonal scale doesn't explore the limits of the medium. But then, Orozco limited himself tonally, too, and produced masterpieces. How about it, students?

A more extended tonal scale is seen in the works in metal, such as the masterful aquatints by Analida Burgos, with their goyesquerie-flavored composition; the rhythmic collographs by M.A. Hopgood and in the work by Lysette Rosado. Vuty Maldonado Davila's hyper-realistic textuologies are credible yet haunted by mystery. Toti Marichal's "Specters", an etching, is a pungent study of harassed puberty, and "The Wave" by Maria Dolores Rodriguez is both simple and powerful. "Gota de Vida" by Jose Escalante, wrings poetry and mystery out of a plumbing structure crisply realized in mixed media.

Woodcuts by Dennis Rivera stand out for their eerie suggestiveness. In "Preoccupation and Hopelessness" the colors are quite functional, unlike too many of our graphics where color is mere decoration. His black and white piece is another voodoo apparition, a diabolic invitation to a scraggly planet somewhere in the galaxy. Hum! Remind me never to go on a trip alone, and least of all, on astronaut duty.

I must point out that exhibiting two small graphic works by two different authors within the same frame and matt, produces a disruptive effect on the spectator. It is ill-advised economy. Better take a large matt and conglomerate many small works by many authors. No sibling rivalries will be produced then.

After the graphics, the paintings came next in quality.

I enjoyed the three textuologies by Betzaida Gonzalez but they look tired and overworked. She limit her color and overdoes the textures in her dutiful front-facing designs. Hers is an informalism tooled to a respectful finish. Probably "Paisaje con signos" is best because a lettrist vital-continuum a la Tomley. In "Yawh" the signic or lettrist effect becomes mere decoration, embroidered on an island isolated by a sea. The vital continuum effect is lost.

Three other textuologies by Angel Nevarez are also limited in color and front facing but are more dramatic than Betzaida's works since they go into major tonal contrasts and use some diagonals and strong curves. "Teluricsens" is nicely atmospheric though some of the loosely applied textures destroy the reality thus created. Too many artists apply acrylic textures helter-skelter, then paint on top. Textures should be designed, not accepted by chance. On the other hand, the textures of his nice "Flor ignea" are too obviously embroidered. A few glacings would help his strong "Movement in Grey", which is not sufficiently mellowed in workmanship.

Vanessa Pineros' Camino solitario "is an interesting color and diagonal space composition, unusual effective as feminist propaganda. Her "New Generation" is more orthodox, front facing instead of diagonal, and suggests a cellular growth vital continuum.

Jose G. Martinez shows a so-so surreal small composition not bad in color. His also-colorful "Electro-Colonization of Our Women" is a more effective document against imperialism than a clenched fist. Fist-clenching is a knee-jerk mechanism, anyway. His "Electro-" is literally a fisted blow on the nose.

Evelyn Colon's nudes show the photo-realist sin of not being conscious of glancing lights, which are always cool. She paints only straight lights or shadows, both always warmly, with no cool in-between glancing light areas, like Kodak's work. Her view of a disembowelled child victim is quite dramatic even now. Let's see how she goes on exploring painting as she should, both in the cools and in the warms.

Felix Vega goes Pop and photo-realist both in his study of a plumbing installation plus its credible foreground. Sturdy and luminous work.

Funny how an academic exercise which had been staring me in the face all through my visit, ended by asserting itself as possible best in the show, not so much by what it put on, but because of how much it left out. I refer to the "Gris" portrait by Ramon Mendez del Valle. A young person's face and hands (Yes, hands, reasonably well realized, in Puerto Rico held together by a flat white silhouette of the body-dress. The quiet presence waits in all dignity, until you become aware of its power. But then it looks at you in a superior manner. (You loved late, too late. Go away.)

In scenography, Reinaldo Colon's "Expansion" project has a cosmic view. It could remind us of the



Photographed by Eddie Crespo

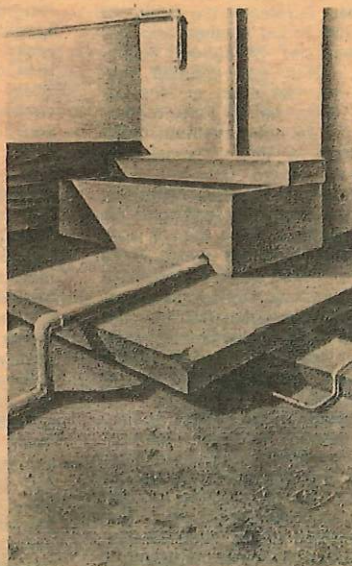


By Vanessa Pinero

origins of our volcanic islands in the Caribbean. They grow and grow as our population grows while nothing is done by bishops or king-pins to stop the expansion.

The drawings in the show are adequately adept, especially anatomically. Crisp pen drawings by Myrna Oliver

stand out because of a magic atmosphere she creates with small scraggly lines. In calligraphy the reasonably good exercises try to be pictorial and end by being loose on the page. Ceramic pieces on show are dominated by the three Jose Hernandez Trabal's zoomorphic vessels. Sic 'em, Trabal Help your clan.



By Felix Vega



By Evelyn Colon