

ART

Rodriguez Baez

At the Dominican Convent

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT

Special to the Star

Of course you know we Puerto Ricans will die if we are not "stroked." Even plants, spirits say, need a stroke of loving music or soft appreciative noise to grow best. Stroking puts all of us on the vim-beam as do vitamins. But stroking is addictive, while vitamins are not.

We "actors" in every field, including children and politicians, need the stroke of applause every time we "act." Then, addicted, we invent manifestos, causes, divorces, pranks or other excuses to receive the warming stuff even when doing nothing in our field—especially when doing nothing.

Scientists, even some artists, can go without strokes of appreciation for long times when they are on the quest of things important. The quest is stroking enough. I feel like that now. I also know that Julio Rosado and other colleagues who do not exhibit for long periods on end, feel the same way. But sooner or later, sooner in the case of artists than of scientists, we surface for the beneficent stroke of sunlight if triumphant. We need our place in the sun especially if we feel triumphant. But sometimes we exhibit, not in triumph, but when we falter in our quest. We seek a challenged, an overview of our progress, a warning from our colleagues or from constructive critics.

Is Felix Rodriguez Baez especially triumphant in his present show in the Institute of Culture's Dominican Convent in old San Juan? No, he is not, if to be triumphant you expect an artist to come out with at least one magnificent piece amongst many, or at least a new promising venture in a new formal order, a so-called new "style," "manner," "fashion" or "mode." No such signs are seen in this show on first glance. "Felor" (Rodriguez Baez' nom-de-pinceau) is presenting the same-quality Felor that he did in 1950. That's his triumph, and it is a triumph of sorts. He is showing retrospectively 101 paintings and 18 drawings and prints, all of them uneven in quality, but consistent in production. This is his 12th one-man show in 26 years, a record of consistency.

At first glance it is surprising how little he has changed, not that change per se is a value. There was a bigger change of style in his work from 1949 to 1950 than there has been ever since. Notice first "El Fanguito" (1949), a beautifully-empastoed, impressionistic-though-darkly-shadowed panoramic view over the slum, looking to the mountains. Never since then has he used empastoed like those nor such iridescent open spaces. Why not?

Because then he went into La Perla's innards, like Jonah into the whale.

There he produced his 1950 austere, brownish "Callejon en la Perla," as if in gut-level-serious-response to the poverty he saw there. Fine. But then this responsive chord is diluted by his use of the same austere brownish look on his impressive 1952 "The Cathedral," which implies that brown means to him both abject transient slum and staid centenary monument. Not very perceptive, really, in a spiritual subtle sense unless he can claim that our cream colored Cathedral metaphorically turned blood-brown-red.

Both pictures do reflect, however, a perceptive eye for appearances even if romantically colored his particular way. He isn't a realist or a true romantic. Since the 50's the same blues, greens, oranges, yellows and reds sing quite exuberantly of his love for both persons and landscape and for both living and inanimate presences. I wish he wouldn't paint direct with the basic colors. He should mix a lot of colors beforehand, each in a color-jar, then paint his works from them, allowing various orchestrations to reflect a more subtle search for color's subtle meanings and expressive and sensuous potentialities. He should search for rainbows, of rainbows and shades of rainbows, since his tendency is to use only one rainbow in all his work.

Actually, Felor does better with color than most Puerto Rican painters. He dares to use strong complementary and saturated colors, like Tufino does. That is better than using only paso-fino-tonal-graduations as most of our artists do. "Puerto

Rico-monochromatic" color harmonies with the usual vague touch of a complementary to enrich lazily, are too simplistic and too recurrent in our art.

Furthermore, I am happy to point out that some — though not all — of his most recent still-lives begin to show very sophisticated color. Witness "Cafeteras y frutas" with its subtle blue touches within refined yellow ochre areas and "Bodegon en rojos" with its Kinetic shadows and "Saleros no. 1, blue" with its discreet and very refined use of complementary and neutral colors.

Even further, let me point out that some — though not all — of his recent figure works and still-lives show a staccato crystalline manner of resolution which is charming and painterly and a departure from his dominant illustrative style. He is using a painter's language in these. In them, he forgets his normal dark line (no matter how rhythmic) which draws every contour, imprisoning the color within. He applies paint as flat color areas and these play against other crystalline color touches without much modelling or without being too contoured by lines. Witness his "Cafeteras y frutas" and "A caballo," 1976 works, both of them. That's what painting is all about.

So maybe we should conclude on second glance that Felor '76 is reasonably triumphant after all, that he has earned an appreciative stroking. If a painter refines color in some works by the time he is 47 and begins to construct as a painter and, not an illustrator, he is triumphant. The rest is a matter of quantity and time.

But that's what I am afraid of: he triumphs "in some, but not all" of the times. Why the unevenness? Maybe his life-style can tell us.

He is a level-headed art executive, in spirit and in deed. As an executive he has to be sure of his way. Maybe that's his problem. Art is greatly subjective, not sure or level-headed. It's so easy for an executive to execute art.

From '54 to '70 Felor Rodriguez Baez was head scenographer, then production and program director for

WAPA-TV. Significantly he jumped jobs then, in his early 40's, as so many creative spirits do in the midpoint of their life and career. In quick succession, since '70 he became operations manager for WRIK-TV, art director for Max Muniz, program director for WIPR-TV and art-director for P.R. Marketing Alliance until '75. He is happy at last in his present job as director of the Institute of Culture Plastic Arts School. I remember how efficiently we used to work together in the hanging of art shows for both the Art Center and the "Asociacion Pro Escuela de Artes Plasticas" in the '50s. Now Felor is director of that once-dim-reality, the school. Somehow it is like him all along, that he should be the efficient level-headed director now.

Also, notice his straight-from-the-shoulder dispassionate "Notes from the Artist" with which he introduces himself in the catalogue to the present show. In the "notas" he answered my (never asked) question about why he was exhibiting now; as if in triumph or in need of a renovating challenge or in answer to the challenge of all art students who (like St. Thomas) prefer to touch good art works by their director before respecting him fully. I suspected the latter two reasons and the small yet ultimately significant "triumphs" I have already mentioned. The following are his reasons however. They are most like him:

"I present my work so as to get an evaluation of what I have done so that I can then close a circle and plan future starting points."

As for his own self-evaluation below, notice how he makes any possible criticism academic as if he had loyally learned a lesson from a previous critic who advised him not to keep on painting, he was so badly commercial:

"The artist's struggle for significance and quality is of his own willful decision: an expression of an ethical or esthetical obsession — without any relation to external norms or desired effects... But earning a living as a painter (only), brings a great

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL

Carnegie Library
Ponce de Leon Ave., Stop 1
Puerta de Tierra 724-1046
Current show: Ceramics and graphics by Rolando Gutierrez

CASA DEL LIBRO

255 Calle del Cristo 723-0354
Open Mon. to Fri. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Sat. 2 to 5 p.m.

GALERIA BOTELLO

208 Cristo St. 723-2879 Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Closed Sun. Oils, graphic, acrylics, sculpture and Santos. Work of Latin-American Artists.

GALERIAS DE LAS AMERICAS

152 Fortaleza Street 723-5787. 25-1455. Open Tues. to Sat. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Paintings by John P. Stewart

GALERIA COABEY

Calle San Sebastian 101
Graphics, Drawings and sculpture.
Current show: "Miniatures."

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900

Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce. 725-2617 open 9-5 daily except Tuesday and Wednesday.

GALERIA DE LA CASA CAMPECHE

200 Calle San Sebastian Open Tues. to Sat. 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Current show: Engravings and water-colors by Suenos (Carlos Ortiz)

GALERIA GUARAGUAO

Callejon de la Capilla, Off San Francisco
Current show: "Exposicion colectiva de puertorriquena"

GALERIA MARIA RECHANY

Magdalena 1363 Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mon. to Sat. 725-4828. Paintings, and prints by Puerto Rican artists.

Current Show: Drawings, paintings and sculpture by Augusto Marin and John Balossi

GALERIA GUATIBIRI

1003 Gonzalez Ave., Santa Rita
Open Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Current show: Paintings by Rafael Rivera Rosa

Photographed

by Eddie Crespo

problem...To paint as I have done after regular work hours, stealing time from sleep, does not produce consistency of style or of quality."

I wish every artist could see himself as clearly as Felor does. They'd suffer less in life. But then they'd suffer his present problem: his work is detached from himself. His work is a result of an inner hunger, all right. As he says, "I have kept painting for emotional subsistence." But somehow his hunger doesn't show in the works themselves. Why aren't they hungry?

His works may seem like romantic expressions but he himself is not a true romantic since his mind is one of objective accuracy, crystal clear about his surrounding reality. He has painted painterly objective pictures, such as his panoramic '49' "El Fanguito," or his '61' "Calabazas." A warm tremulous passion is felt, however, in such "accurately subjective" pictures as the '58' "El Hoyo no. 2," and the '60' "Delincuencia Jovenil" and "Entierrito en el Hoyo," all about La Perla's innards. But this passion passed. Why?

So, since he expects "an evaluation" to "close a circle," in the absence of more time and talk with the artist I am left with the following tentative evaluation: given his crystal-clear and objective mind, then the style he has developed for some of his series of 1976 still lifes is most like him even in their happy tonal arrangements. They should serve him best at least to say "bottles, ceramics and fruits". That was enough for objective and famous Morandi.

But if the above destiny is not enough to stroke Felor's patriotic heart, then an anguish or romantic 'angst' is needed. Maybe Felor's. Maybe Puerto Rico's. We live so happily in Puerto Rico! Never have we been really stricken because we have been too stroked. So we are sayable by your style, Felor, after you affirm your style a little more. Then, if you can do some stroking or can sing of our pathos and our bathos, and yet maintain your ethos, we will consider you national and epic. We are so lyric.



'Homenaje' a Picasso'



'Cafeteras y frutas'



'Plaza Padre Rufo'



'¡A caballo!'

FOR FELIX BONILLA NORAT

Respectfully, I wish to take issue with Felix Bonilla Norat. His lukewarm, hither and yon review of the third annual UNESCO salon brings to mind a kind of vacillation that does a disservice to the serious efforts of a group of dedicated artists. The semantic self stimulation indulged in, as to whether the works were quite good, or excellent, is a hair being split for the sake of verbiage. If I were to say that I find the work of Raul Zayas excellent but not superb or that I find the work of Lope Max superb but not magnificent, I would consider myself guilty of damning with faint praise.

In the case where a distinction is made between whether a work is "quite good" or "excellent" it becomes a subjective matter, and since the distinction is so fine I believe it would be much healthier for all concerned to accentuate the positive. To relegate an entire exhibition (in which I saw many fine works) to a position of mediocrity, is presumptuous, to say the least, and most definitely (disavowances to the contrary) is an absolute value judgement.

Professor Bonilla also displays a pronounced dislike for eclecticism, and suggests that it is a trait peculiar to Puerto Rican artists. This is definitely not the case. In every major competition that I have ever participated in, anywhere, there has been a similar range of styles. It's the nature of the beast because artists tend to vary in their influences, and I find an eclectic makeup healthy, rather than the reactionary dominance of a regional form. I think it's marvelous to seek a pure Puerto Rican art form, but foolish to deny the fact that art is a world wide historical phenomena which cannot be bound by geography or patriotism. Who among us can deny the influence of Cezanne (France), Picasso (Spain), Kandinsky (Russia), Orozco (Mexico), Pollack (U.S.), Moore (England) etc., etc. And what would justify such a denial?

Puerto Rico's participation in the cultural life of the 20th Century could be seriously impaired by too stringent an insistence on regional thinking, for whatever motivation.

By and large I found Felix Bonilla's review a kind of supercilious meandering, which does nothing to encourage Alice and Juan in wonderland to start.

PAUL CAMACHO
Bayamon

MUSEO DE LA FUNDACION

Behind Tapia Theater, Plaza Colon 725-5962.
Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Mon. Indian
Artifacts and sculpture.

MUSEO DE BELLAS ARTES

Instituto de Cultura 253 Cristo St. 723-2320.
Open every day 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Oils, prints
and graphics.
Current show: Works by Wilfredo. Labiosa

MUSEO DEL GRABADO
LATINOAMERICANO

casa de los Contrafuertes, 101 San Sebastian
St., Plaza San Jose second floor. Open every
day from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Current show: Graphics by Colombian artist
Gloria Duncan

MUSEO DE LOS SANTOS

Instituto de Cultura, Casa de los contrafuertes,
Plaza San-Jose. Open every day 8:30 a.m. to 5
p.m.

MUSEO DEL CONVENTO DE SANTO
DOMINGO

Instituto de Cultura. Open every day 8:30 a.m.
to 5 p.m. Corner Cristo and Norzagaray. Plaza
San Jose, 724-0700, 724-0702.
Current Show: Paintings and drawings by
Felor-Felix Rodriguez Baez and Nativity scenes by
artesanos.

MUSEO DEL MAR

Pier One, Old San Juan
Open Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m.
to 5 p.m. or until ships sail. Current Show:
"Lighthouses of Puerto Rico" by Antonio Mar-
tinez Montes.

PONCE MUSEUM OF ART

Las Americas Ave. 842-6215. Open Wed. to Sat.
10 a.m. to 4 p.m.:
Sun. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mon. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.;
Paintings by Stephen Csoka

SALON ISABEL II

City Hall. Open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.
to 4 p.m.

UPR MUSEUM

University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.
764-0000 Ext. 2452 or 2456. Open daily
10 to 5.