

LARRY RIVERS



BY FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

The epitome of American painting history since 1949, the mutant practitioner of many of its styles, manners and strains, painter Larry Rivers was himself "invited artist" of the Art Department of InterAmerican University in San German. The occasion was a three-day intensive meeting of minds last week between Puerto Rican art students and teachers from many towns on the island and an impressively intelligent, sensitive and witty person who functions not so much on the intellectual as on the gut level.

Since Rivers had been flu-ridden lately, he brought with him a sympathetic alter ego, David C. Levy, dean of the Parson's School of Design, who interjected momentary comments to give Rivers' throat a respite. The invited artist's physical resistance and determination, however, were surprising, and his interest never failed, so he lasted through the three days, although the strain showed on his face.

Such a hardworking sportive person naturally attracted all of us. "He is game," many students said, although sometimes they couldn't understand his words, as is common with too many of our university students in front of English-speaking visitors, especially if they have U.S. local accents, although Rivers' is not so local by now. I remember I couldn't understand half of what Herbert Read said in his UPR lecture; Jaime Benitez said he understood only one-fourth, "so we will have to publish it," which

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was done. I wonder if some of the things "Larry Rivers Said" can be published somehow. They were intuitive stream-of-consciousness, fluid remarks, very personal and illuminating when in front of slides of his art works. I enjoyed listening to him and his alter ego.

The program was: on Thursday morning, Feb. 26, a slide show of many of the artist's works with his commentaries. This was "the most vivid," "the most life-enhancing" part of the whole program according to Mr. Consensus. On Thursday evening, a "class critique" which I attended, during which Rivers faced both a student and his or her work and established charming, witty, impromptu dialogues. He was careful to encourage while he criticized. I noticed he had more to say in front of figurative works. "I am very realistically rooted," he explained in front of an abstract painting but he naturally enjoyed the painterly parts.

In front of a surrealist nightmare with many ideas and figures, he said: "Guardi in two square inches can paint a whole boat with figures in it. Drawing every day is necessary. Ideas will come. Draw more so as to control things more." When the student defensively argued that his figures were simplified on purpose, Rivers answered, "You have to know a thing before you can simplify it. It's your job to see what things are like. Otherwise you walk a tight rope." A professional in action is a joy to watch. I also remember Levy's remark: "artists should react to the world, not to the art world."

Early Friday afternoon, a videotape show was, by consensus opinion, a low-keyed "O.K., but..." affair. It demonstrated what we all knew: that Larry Rivers is a painter's painter, a detailed intensive searcher of techniques, an exquisite worker. Further-

more, his ironic commentary proves that he can see himself as part of the human condition, and that his students and helpers believe in him as the artist in command of the concert of work. But the constant zooming in on the spot where the specific action was at, plus the audio echoes, caused a molecular, not a molar vision of the whole operation. The vital continuum of patches which used to be so interesting in Rivers' paintings and might be excellent in free-wheeling films, is not so useful for a straight documentary. Before he spend the money on the final film, he should think twice. In a crowded noisy condition dubbing the audio part might work better.

Rolando Lopez Dirube asked Rivers, "Why the video tapes? Why not a simple documentary film?" Rivers answered: "I meant to have a film done but didn't have time." (He had been very sick, actually).

But he was begging the question since the videotape gadgetry step is not necessary for filming. But it seems to be the current fashion, brought on by the latest "vanguards": Process Art, Teatro Mundo, Body Works and Conceptual Art pieces end in time, like rites of passage, and videotapes make a convenient record of whatever "happened."

In the latest San Paulo Biennial, all the American and Japanese entries were videotapes I understand. The Japanese presented individual short entries but the Americans were banded in a single circuit. It featured many TV's all with the same simultaneous image and each artist's entry following the previous one in time, ad nauseam. The jury refused to stay to the bitter end of the sequenced ordeal. "When you see one, you have seen them all" they grumbled. ("Low voltage" was the official excuse given

by the jurors.) Prizes were awarded to other countries. But what really got the jury was the "garden" effect. The TV's of the American section were "artistically" surrounded by expensive lush plants. In a country with so many beautiful Burle Marx gardens, the "U.S. garden" was, fit for laughing. A matter of overkill, where the medium killed the messages and itself. Maybe Larry Rivers will have second thoughts about the fashionable gadgetry, especially if it goes bloom often enough as it will in artists' studios especially.

Later Rivers inaugurated a small informal and unpretentious exhibit of his drawings. I enjoyed his "Bread and Butter Letter" (he should copyright and publish it); "Dear blank: Blanks-blanks-blanks — Sincerely, blank." On top of the blanks, a slice of bread and slices of butter are drawn. "This show reminds me of seeing the hoofprints of Attila's horse long after Attila has galloped away, Larry Rivers has many finer things," was Dirube's comment. After the exhibit we moved to the university vice-president's house for some drinks, and though very tired, Rivers regaled us with an impromptu slide presentation of his works from which got a lot of ideas about the man and his signs or indexes, images of the self.

Though Rivers is an established master and appears in almost all "Contemporary American Art" histories, he has his detractors. Critic Barbara Rose considers him a "minor realist" whereas academicians consider him "another Hans Hoffman follower" (except for a few works like "Berdie", naturally). Arnasson in his "History of Modern Art" calls him a "talented brilliant eclectic." We eclectics seem to catch it from all sides: "Puerto Rican art is the triumph of



"Here," says Bonilla, "are six well-known Puerto Rican artists caught in the act of fraternizing with five 'colonizing artists' from three different countries." From left; top row, Bonilla, Myrna Baez, Maria Somoza, Antonio Torres Martino, Larry Rivers, Rolando Lopez Dirube formerly of Cuba, Prof. Rico of Colombia, Carmelo Fontanez, and David C. Levy, dean of Parson's School of Design in New York, in front: Gloria de Duncan of Colombia and Noemi

Ruiz; head of the Art department at Interamerican University in San German. The occasion was a reception for Rivers as part of his three-day tenure as visiting artist at IAU. Rivers gave a slide presentation of his work on Thursday and a video tape of his latest work on Friday followed by the opening of an exhibit of his drawings.

At IAU in SAN GERMAN

eclecticism," according to my favorite colonizer, Marta Traba, the Argentinian critic. She makes it sound like a sickness!

Eclecticism: n. Method or practice of selecting what seems best from various systems, esp. in forming a religious or philosophical doctrine, also a body of doctrines, methods, etc., resulting from such a choice.

I emphasize "choice." Puerto Ricans and Larry Rivers have chosen to choose what seems best from whatever source. If that's a sickness, let another Argentine critic decide: Squirru, publicizing Latin American art at our Ateneo, vaunted how "every continent belongs to us; modernisms or primitive arts from everywhere, they strengthen us, because we have their blood." Doesn't that sound like a nice eclectic burundanga?

The joke is that with instant TV through satellites and instant coffee and instant Inca coke in every country, eclecticism is what's going on. You know, "Planet Earth" I don't believe in First, Second or Third Worlds. Kind of not mathematical: 3 in 1.

Therefore, when eclectics got together as we did this past week through the meritorious efforts of Noemi Ruiz, IAU Art Department head, a good time was had by all. No axis grinds. Various countries were represented. San German was Puerto Rico's art capital during the week, thanks to Miss Ruiz and to Rivers' presence.

To start my measurements of his professionalism, I told Rivers he had not been included in the important Metropolitan Museum exhibition "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970." Without batting an eye he said evenly "Well, Henry Geldzahler had a job to do and he did it as he thought he should. It was his responsibility." I almost shook his hand then and there. Too many artists cry foul or political in a similar situation.

In Sam Hunter's comprehensive "Larry Rivers," a Harry M. Abraham's book, some of the many works chosen for reproduction do not honor the painter's name, I told Rivers. "Well, many times I want to burn or re-do works of mine that I see in museums," he said. It does him honor to thus recognize the uneven quality of his work, its fluidity. Both his work and life have the "immediate incompleteness" of which he spoke in connection with a slide showing a vacuum-formed plastics relief with painting added afterwards, not necessarily as an afterthought, but as a fencer's parry and riposte, an instinctive act, a fluxion.

Fluxion! A proven professional, he is in my book. But there are certain signs... Then I remember a student said he said he was a rebel against death. I then realize he is now 53 years old: he was born in 1923. So he is at the mid-point in his career! So if he flows around it's because he is... boxing!

That's what happens when a very sensitive, creative spirit comes face to face with himself at the inevitable mid-point of his career. He boxes. It's a grim fight. The reaper is nearer, and what one has done up to now, no matter how much (and Larry Rivers has reaped a hell of a lot) everything we have done seems like nothing compared to what we thought we should have done by now.

I think of River's accidented life, his love affair with primitive societies, his paintings of negroes after his trips to Africa helping famous film maker Gaisseau. Also of his present charming Japanese paintings, though they have a rite of passage flavor. No wonder Levy didn't see the first one the first time it was hung in Rivers' studio. He expected a Larry Rivers. Is it? Let's see.

Foreign exotic odalisques or warriors — whether Moroccan, Japanese or African — primitive cultures, habitats and artifacts are a perpetual motive for the romantics who initiated a long series of "expressions of the self" which are still going on in the many expressionisms and the many other isms of the past 150 years. Rivers is such a romantic. And his self could normally be read in his spontaneously produced "signs" and sayings, indexes to his soul. What kind of an index are the Japanese paintings?

It is relatively easy to hide one's soul behind a firmly-painted academic or realistic nude or landscape or in a social painting or in Rivers' present Japanese paintings. Probers see what's painted and do not see the artist except here and there, in a touch, or an omission, or as in Ingres' erotic distortions. Where is Rivers' touch in the Japanese paintings? Or is he depersonalizing himself in expiation of former egotism?

Rivers' 1955 "Double Portrait of Berdie" was a monument to a mother figure, his very helpful mother-in-law, but also a double-take cannon ball against abstract expressionism. It has shock value, as does poet O'Hara's front-facing nude portrait. The shock value is the Rivers touch at that young stage when he was shooting the town up, to call attention to his paintings and to himself, which he did efficiently. Play, playboy! Before Father Time comes!

But do the impersonal Japanese paintings have shock value? Not Charm, exquisite technique, novelty, sign of search and research, yes. But where is the Larry Rivers touch? The put-on irony of copying a child's coloring book? Maybe. But he can do that without working so hard. His "French Money," "Cigarette Packages," "Old Masters' Cigars," "Websters Cigars," "Postage Stamps," "French, Italian and English Parts of the Body Vocabulary Lessons" and many other series of works from '55 to '68 were effortless paintings, direct, economical yet rich of means and very affective as personal manifestations of his playful zesty self and of his love for painting.

What then makes him work so extra hard at the Japanese paintings if his friend Levy didn't even see the first one he put up in his studio? I believe the answer is strategic and military: he told our students he had declared himself a rebel against death with his 1968 "Me and My Shadow". He is at war! One of his war machines is the air brush: it produces countless veils against the reaper.

Rebel Larry Rivers' self is hiding behind the air gun and the stencils.

He understands rebels: "Washington Crossing the Delaware" of the early fifties put him on the art map. "The Paul Revere Event" and the "Boston Massacre" are impressive murals of the late sixties. "I wanted to do for my country what Tolstoi did for Russia," he told the students. "It was cold on the Delaware! An inferno. This head in the composition is from Michelangelo's Inferno." (Inferno... Inferno!)

And so the airbrush has entered into Larry Rivers life and art. Is it necessary aesthetically?

Yes, if he wants to produce a photographic image as demanded or hoped for by an African customer in love with a particular life and fashion model. The current Photo Realistic painters use it, just as some Pop artists used it to produce subtle gradations on a simplified imagery, a complement to enrich a raw, banal "made in USA" nude or tin can. Certainly the airbrushed leopard skin in one of Rivers' current works is very "credible" as an object to be "really touched."

But since when is illustrative touch credibility important to Larry Rivers whose painterly tactile values are justly famous? I think: A touchable simulacrum interposed between yourself and the enemy, may give you some momentary rest. But not for long! Think of a better defense, Larry Rivers. And I keep thinking:

I know you love Japanese wood cuts, Larry. Some of them have such beautifully modulated colored backgrounds and figures! Airbrushing helps you simulate those effects on your present series of paintings based on the magnificent drawings found in a simple coloring book for Japanese children: Like Picasso, you have cannibalized famous artists' works before, so why not again? Besides, you told us you admired those craftsmen and artists who produced those works in the 18th Century. They could drink and romp all night and yet do a good job the next day, just as you try to do.

But think, Larry, I keep talking in my mind, you are producing gigantic, epic monotypes for which you lovingly prepare exquisite plastic stencils, sometimes a hundred for one painting. Japanese editions run into thousands and the graphics are small in size. For an edition of one, do you need the in-between time-consuming step of the stencils? When as you said you are 'not ashamed of using

the dry brush to produce air-brush effects'? In other words, you know the stencils aren't necessary for such huge single works and for the desired effect of luminous translucency in gradation. You can do it free-hand with both airbrush and regular brush or simple spatter spray. So why do you take time to do the stencils? I know, some of them are art works per se, you showed us one of a woman.

But I believe the real reason is that you are placing a hell of a lot of films between yourself and...the painting. Is that your enemy? You are afraid of painting, Larry Rivers? You no longer believe in your magnificent command of the simple painter's job? Painting is ever faithful. Once you possess her, she's your for life. Why bother then with compressors, whose noises you have to hide with music-producing machines, whose products are like Salome's veils...Tantalus is putting you on, Larry, or maybe Hollywood... or TVs... or di Chirico's fate...

The United States won its independence from Europe in 1950, with abstract expressionism, epic in scale and in gusto. Europe, including Spain and England, plus Japan, India, Canada and Latin America became American colonies, not so much because of US dollars but because the ideas were in tune with the times. Epic painterly reactions like Larry Rivers' figurations were eagerly welcomed worldwide. Timid English Pop of the late fifties became epic American Pop of the sixties. Then up comes op, nicely washed, then dirty Junk and Funk, then clinically clean Minimalism, then dirty Earth Works, then clean Technotronic art, etc. Oh my God! Now comes the deluge of gadgety art.

Of course it was necessary to ecumenically try to find the "complete" art, a happening of all the arts. (Do you remember the Opera's beginnings?) It was also necessary to find the minimum frontiers of what art is-but then, man has been designing himself, doing body works and earth works and gadgets since the Pleistocene to today, so what else is new. Two million year of art for this?

By now the US is another of the colonies of the world, of Steamship Earth. As it should be. One world. But no, everybody has to be famous, and a "new" look is instant gadgety fame.

Oh, Larry, listen to the nightingale! It sings by day or night without recording it or inviting the press, it sings in its nest, which is always close to the ground, because it is in harmony with its universe... It is calling to you, but the damned TV's and circuits and umbilical electrical cords interfere... (umbilical?)

Was I surprised when Larry Rivers himself came to San German armed with another in-between thing, a videotape umbilically tied to a close circuit TV which by itself is another in-between thing he puts in front of the pursuing angels! Barricades...umbilical...

I don't know why I keep thinking of

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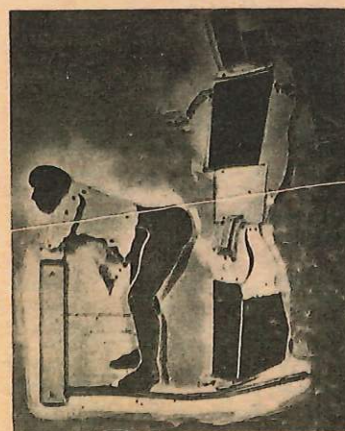
'The Elimination of Nostalgia, ABC,' 1967.



'Don't Fall,' 1966.



'Playmate,' 1965.



'Lampman Loves It,' 1966.

LARRY RIVERS IN A RITE OF PASSAGE

(Continued from Page 7)

Synge's Christy, the "Playboy of the Western World," in connection with Larry Rivers. Christy is the instant popular hero as a runner. And Larry has always been successfully running all over circumstances, places, events, and countries, just as his painting is usually a running commentary on the highspots of whatever his subject is. As he said in front of an unexpected slide of one of his works "Oh my God, that's a coyote!" And then, "Well! That's A Jazz Drummer's Three Weeks with a Woman". Bits here and there. I drew in parts of the drum—not interested in other parts—what I liked of what was there is what is here on the canvas." (I couldn't easily see the woman at all and the painting functioned as a series of disparate patches making up a protoplasmic vital continuum in the abstract expressionist manner.)

Synge's Christy, the irrepressible runner and charming hero has to kill his father three times. Each time his father re-appears, claiming him, until at last Christy goes home with the old man. Now, symbolically, Larry Rivers has been killing the Establishment (father) throughout his "breezy unpredictable play with life and with art mediums and types of imagery" to quote from the flyleaf of Sam Hunter's book on the artist which goes on stressing the "complex, inventive, daring, large-scaled and irresponsible" personality of our guest.

In this "killing-father-off" context, a haunting Rivers family portrait titled "The Elimination of Nostalgia," (1967), shows him as a father, sitting cross-legged, a drink in his hand. A son on his left apes his pose, crosslegs, but no drink. His daughter is behind him standing up with a drink, her head inside a kind of box. (?) A second son looks kind of askance, cigarette in lips, arms and hands down, and a frosted glass covering him almost to the shoulders. (?)

But what makes the picture haunting is that the two crosslegged figures were generated in a 1966 horizontal picture called "Don't Fall and Me" (and Me). Now, "Don't Fall" is a 1966 vertical construction which shows a child in a bending position. He might fall where he is at, and the constructed words in relief tell him so. Nice. Family relationships heretofore. But now I ask, why did Rivers, who can draw so freely, use the child's bending position (foot, leg and buttocks) almost verbatim for his sexy plexiglass "Playmate" construction and also for his homosexual in the two-figure construction "Altman Loves It" (1966). It probably is chance, and not a charade or allegory Rivers has up his sleeve. The photos come so close together in Sam Hunter's book on the artist that many students thought they meant something as a series. Malicious Latin minds we have!

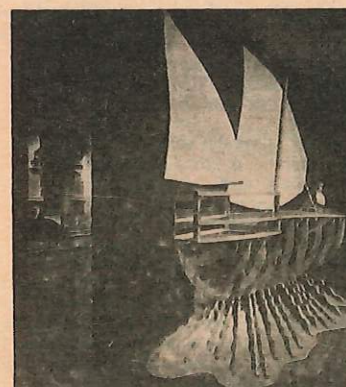
Another thing my students noticed is how Larry Rivers' best compositions are usually vertical. Whenever he tries horizontal spaces he tends to split them up in vertical tensions, beginning with "Berdie," or in patches, beginning with "George Washington Crossing the Delaware." The only



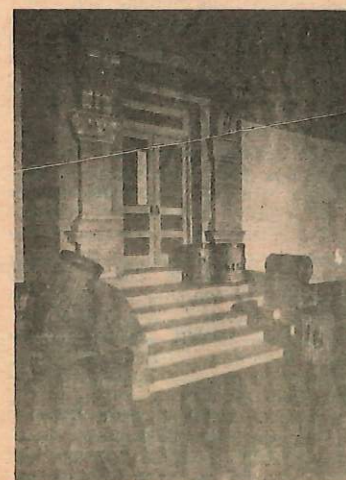
'Double Portrait of Berdie,' 1955.



'Caucasian Woman,' Early 70's.



'A Slave Ship,' 1970.



'The Ghetto Stoop,' 1969.

satisfactory horizontal compositions are "Buck" and lately the "Boston Massacre" and "Paul Revere." "He seems to have a Gothic mind," said a student. "He is looking for father", I said. "Maybe to kill him again"....

Larry Rivers' major achievements since '68 are important works. I even like some of the charming Japanese figures, including his shaped "Palace Revolution" which works as in fluxion, as in a palace passage.

He seems to be fighting with his auras and his shadows now, though I suspect he relishes fighting such phantoms. (Maybe that's why he has unconsciously taken to the air brush displays). It's Jacob again, fighting with his Angel, as happens with so many sensitive people in their forties, or early fifties. In Jewish explanations, sometimes the angel is supposed to mean the torturing inner conscience so highly developed after so many diasporas, sometimes it means nationhood, or at least the vital territory necessary to both man and beast, or the earthly Paradise Lost.

Rivers' present Pop images go beyond dead pan or Brillo Pop. They have a Social Realism bite. But a personal Romantic angst is implicit in many early '70's works such as the prescient "Me and My Shadow," the Apocalyptic "Paul Revere Event" and the torturing and tortured "Caucasian Woman" (who lies in a bed surrounded by hanged negro men). His "Bad Witch" of heroin, is a bad picture but a good totem of anxiety.

His 1970 "Slave Ship" construction suggests the ancient Noah's ark and the 1969 "Ghetto Stoop" construction with literal garbage cans suggests the present human condition of so many tribal or racial "minorities," not just the Jewish tribes. Past transits, present choke and gasp! Salvation is sought above the primeval waters, but a personal sense of guilty unease seems to hold him tied to murky depths. His presently more obvious concern with other humans, as humans, especially the minorities, is like a kind of propitiatory offering to the Nameless One.

Rivers used to be the painter, playboy above the crowd, ego centered—now he is Larry amongst us humans, and his flesh may die, and his intent eyes probe the future. So he rebels against death. But this avowed rebellion against death I suspect is an inventory explicative of his Self's here and now. Depersonalized, offering a gift to the Father! He has found that a persona is a mask.

You are growing up at last, Larry Rivers. Welcome to the tribe of the Elders (the Establishment). Your best works are yet to be done. You are relatively young, and your lyrical painterly songs can become epic, not necessarily because of size but because of intensity. Playful spirits and not intensity or density have been far too present in your work up to now: Act on your expressed conviction that the time of vanguard fashions and manifestoes is gone. So are exhibitionist and other dilatory tactics no longer any good. You are taller than you think, Larry Rivers.