

ART

Aguadilla's Art Center

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

From the height of my 43 years, I see that it was vanity, not peace of mind that drove me," says Antonio Loro of his past career. "Now I am my own boss. I used to have contracts with galleries forcing me to paint. It used to make me nervous. Now I am relaxed."

Loro is the founder of the Aguadilla Art Center which includes a school, gallery and art supply shop.

Born in Italy, near Yugoslavia on May 6, 1934, he spent his boyhood in various crafts, agriculture and ceramics, as did his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and ancestors before him. "For centuries, every school kid in the city of Nove, painted the famous Nove ceramics. Students from all of Europe come to study there. The city's river supplies all the materials, from the clays to the hydraulic energy used in the factory. At home, my family, made everything from straw-woven peasant chairs to Gobelin tapestries."

"But one of my most satisfactory boyhood memories is seeing my father, who was a decorator, wallowing in the soil of the farm, ecstatically wallowing. I too love the earth, I love to get 'clayey dirty' in it. We were always country people. Strong as bulls, we Veneti people, thick-set and healthy mountain climbers. Puerto Rico's mountains are little steps next to the Alps. I fell in love with the jibaros here when I came to. Puerto Rico. It took me back to my first 15 years in Italy."

"The most beautiful experiences in life I have had with country people, including the Quichua and Guarani Indians of South America. An Indian will sleep in the entrance of his home

when he has guests inside so that if a poisonous snake crawls into the house, it is he and not his guests who get bitten."

In my classes here at the Aguadilla Art Center I always prepare coffee for my students. We feel like friends, all of us alike. I love it when the students begin to see magic and beauty in very simple things. Some of my students cannot pay me, but I love to see them progress. I organize contests and sales and scholarships for them. Sometimes I close up and we all go painting in the countryside. That's a holiday even in the work-day.

"I have given free classes and lectures around here in many other schools and University classrooms. The idea is that the students don't have to pass through what I had to pass through to get there..."

Loro's training was quite kaleidoscopic: drawing and painting at Milan's Brera Academy continued at Buenos Aires's Fine Arts Studio Workshops. Art and scenography at Buenos Aires University's Art Studies Center. Ceramics at Buenos Aires National School of Ceramics. Other training picked up on various trips to the Americas and Europe.

In Buenos Aires he earned a "first prize for foreigners" in the Annual Salon of 1958 when he was 24; then a gold medal with diploma in 1960; then a first prize for a maquette for the Italo-Argentine Monument in 1960, and the grand prize for an oil painting, "Image of a Trip," a strange almost abstract textural urban landscape, in Buenos Aires First Biennial of Graphics in 1967. In 1971 in Caserta, Italy, "Italy 2000" International Painting contest, he won the major prize. He was 37 years old.

After one-man shows in Buenos



Center founder and director Antonio Loro holds an adult class in painting.



A young student gets

Aires, 1966; Montevideo 1967; Asunción, Paraguay 1967 and 1969, and after the Caserta 1971 break-through, he was invited to show and give demonstrations and lectures in various Arizona State universities, art schools and galleries. It was at Tucson's Pima College, that he met his future wife, Susan Albee of Puerto Rico. Then he worked as an interior designer in New York (including "fine piano decorations, gold-leafed in Byzantine, Venetian and other styles"). He even showed work in the Metropolitan Museum's staff art exhibit. His wife was working in the library at the Cloisters.

Then Susan's parents invited him to come to Puerto Rico where they had a farm in Aguadilla. Now he knows what it is to cut cane, take care of cattle and horses, be a construction boss, a mural painter (with two 20-foot murals to his credit, one at the University of Puerto Rico Regional Colleges Central Administration building in Rio Piedras, the other in Arecibo). Then he became a jewelry manufacturer and designer ("for which we are still paying the consequences"). Some of the designs I saw are handsome, with magically moving little parts. Kinetic jewelry.

"Then I came upon myself at last," Lord says now. "There's a great human potential in Aguadilla. I opened the art school, the Francisco Oller Art Gallery, and the art supply shop right where they are now. Later we shall move our home here to the school."

I understand he is doing well in his school, getting students even from San German, Mayaguez and Ponce. He communicates excellently in Spanish, not so well in English. The students seemed to be interesting and

interested when I saw them one weekday morning. Coffee was percolating in one corner. A cassette-movie on crafts with sound was going on in another. A reasonably good art show by a young artist hung in the gallery.

The art showing is free to the artists, as is the catalog. Loro showed me four catalogs of previous shows, printed in offset with two colors and two half-tone reproductions of art works on four pages in each. Quite decent. I wish our UPR Museum shows had such good simple catalogs for every exhibit.

I wish him well with his Aguadilla Art Center!

But I must pursue the inner Loro, he who is bringing gifts to our country. How, besides by marriage, did he really evolve into our insular context?

"Showing and competing as an artist and designer in Europe and in South and North America prepared me for the here and now. But it was vanity just the same, not peace of mind that used to drive me in other lands. A restless search to assert myself; to expose my works and to seize life by its neck. Those were my aims."

"I wasted so much time!" he sighs...

I tell myself: classical symptoms for his age. But unlike those who, like Jacob, fight the angel, he earthly and wisely blames his vanity.

"Now in Puerto Rico I want to prepare my students better than I was prepared," Loro continues. "I want to prepare them more quickly than I prepared myself, to animate them carefully so they don't go through life helter-skelter. Simplicity of direction within completeness of aim and effort are my intentions."

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL
Carnegie Library

Ponce de Leon Ave., Stop 1
Puerta de Tierra 724-1048
Open Mon. to Fri. 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.
Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Current Show: "Antique Photographs" A collection of photographs from early 19th century. And oils by Katherine Newson and jewelry by Walter Newson

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.

GALERIA COABEY

Calle San Sebastian 101
Graphics, Drawings and sculpture.
Current show: Beginning Friday: "Taller Tetuan," a collective print exhibition

GALERIAS DE LAS AMERICAS

152 Fortaleza Street 723-5787. 725-1455. Open Tues. to Sat. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Current show: oils and silkscreens by Emilio Sanchez; photos by Fritz Henle.

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900

Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce. 725-2617 open 9-5 daily except Tuesday and Wednesday. Current show: "Photography in Printmaking." 30 prints from Pratt Graphics Center.

GALERIA DE LA CASA CAMPECHE

200 Calle San Sebastian "Hoyos blancos," exhibit of photographs by Charles Blasiny Rivera

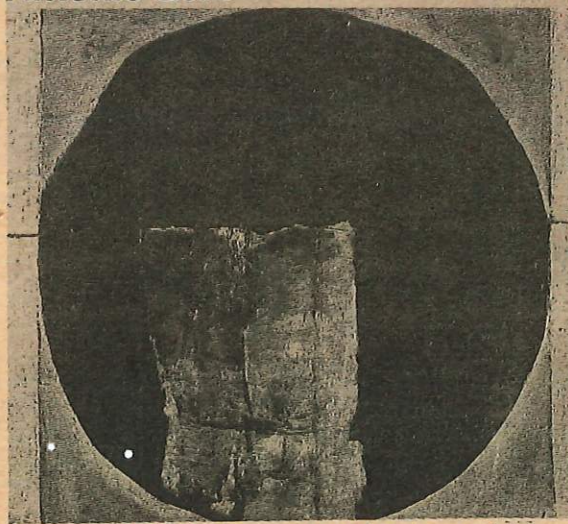
GALERIA MARIA RECHANY

Magdalena 1363 Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mon. to

Antonio Loro



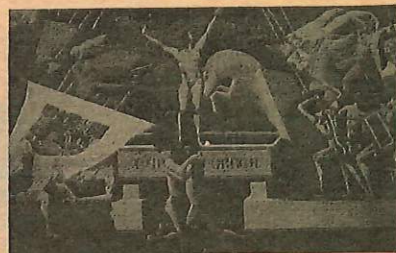
Lesson in technique.



"Imagen de un Viaje," a painting by Loro, from the cover of the catalog for his show at Arizona State University.



"American Woman of the Past," won Loro first prize, at the International Competition of Painting, Caserta, Italy, 1971.



"Capitan Correa" Loro's mural at the UPR Regional College library in Arecibo.



A detail from a Loro painting.

But Loro is at the first stock-taking point and he seems strong as a bull. He has put up four sturdy block and concrete walls as an extension in his home, part of his future school by himself. The finished plastering seems quite plumb and professional, its color the color of a proper cement and sand mix and I can hear no "cucarachas" or hollow sounds as I knock on the wall. I imagine he designed proper foundations.

He knows architecture, was a construction boss for three years; a year and a half on Old San Juan restorations, a year and a half helping build the Arecibo Regional College.

For the Arecibo college library-lobby, he painted a poised ivory-tan-and-brown mural, "Capitan Correa," with symbolically nude bodies and horses in ritual poses including a central kneeling pair of lovers and a standing invocator in the very center. Everybody's nudity is very chaste. The most erotic parts of the mural are the horses with arched necks and flowing manes. Very polished of finish, the mural is of decided academic-Italianate influence. I preferred the looser, more colorful and tactile preliminary sketch he painted for it. He should keep the sketch for his Aguadilla Art Center as a conversation piece for his students who also may see the finished mural for comparison in Arecibo as an example of free versus official expressions.

Next to that sketch he could also show a photo of his very lively monotype with its very lively horses and warriors, "San Martin's Battle of San Lorenzo," which won the gold medal in the 1960 Buenos Aires Salon of Plastic Arts. Dash and verve are very well served in this work. As a counterpoint, some of his latter richly

textured semi-abstract creations of somber resonant umbers could be shown, simple compositions showing the expert technical resources which drew the attention of Arizona State Universities.

I was surprised to learn that he never rode a horse until he came to Puerto Rico. And what a teacher he had — his own wife! The Susan Albee of paso fino competition fame. Behind the books on their library wall, almost hidden from view, stand more than 400 cups and statues she has won since she was a child. She has owned renowned paso fino champions and competed here and in the States. Her picture on horseback holding a filled-water-glass has appeared in Japanese and other world newspaper travel sections.

Mrs. Loro, nee Albee, is the daughter of a former Ramey Air Base engineer. Both her parents were equitation enthusiasts who bought land in Aguadilla mostly, I think, to keep, train and breed their horses, since their charmingly simple home seems to be an "aggregate" affair. The Aguadilla Art Center will eventually be where their home is now with plenty of beautiful grounds around including studio cabins for artists and students from abroad and Puerto Rico. An excellent idea.

Their evidently loved child speaks happily of his own horse, and old respectful mare, which he rides — from the height of his 3 years — next to his mother's horse as they inspect the few animals they still keep on the farm. Susan keeps the farm and it is quite a chore. No wonder she doesn't sculpt any more.

"Not for the time being," she says. "My art teachers had faith in me so I shall do something yet. Just now we

have to get settled."

Their child seems sure of himself and very healthy, and yet he kept so quiet on the three-hour afternoon ride from Catano to Aguadilla after having been a relative prisoner the whole morning while his mother bought art supplies in San Juan for the store. Almost eight hours there and back with not a whimper. I was worried about too much discipline or slow wits... until he blossomed out on his own and in due time. Quite a round-faced, humorous-eyed conversationalist! The secret is the lovingness of both parents.

Seeing the three of them together makes me think they have a future. So, automatically, since Susan is definitely for it also, I believe that Loro's Aguadilla Art Center decidedly has a future. He has just gotten his U.S. citizenship papers and seems happy with their special Bicentennial-year colors.

Loro is a descendant of the ancient Veneti tribe of north Italy. The Veneti were experts in the art of making alliances. In the 2nd Century B.C. they came under Roman rule not through conquest but by way of autonomous alliance, as he and Susan are now allied in Aguadilla. Tacitus claims the Veneti came from the Baltic but others claim they were Illyrians, perhaps Albanian. In any case, his native Italian "Veneti" tongue has French, German, Greek, Arab and Slav linguistic influences due to various invasions. Loro believes they have a Hunnish origin too. It was the coming of the Huns that forced some of the natives to cluster on the islands of future Venice.

Loro claims he can communicate in four romance languages and some Russian, Croatian, Serbian and En-

glish. I'd add the language of body gestures.

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"From the height of my 43 years," he said at the beginning of our conversation. The phrase is a good clue to his adulthood and sureness of self at this "life-death-plus-accomplishments" check point of the middle forties. Others deny their age at this point. He climbs up it, looks far out into his past and his evolving future from his present tense and present stand in Aguadilla. There is no tenseness, just pensiveness in his demeanor as we talk, though we are both smoking and drinking too much late at night in his home. No lines of strain show on his face and smooth-round forehead.

So I chide him. "You claim to be of the earth, earthy and from the height of our age, you have opted into 'service' as many of us have. But there must be something you have withheld, a minimum territory for yourself; the irreducible minimum of the self. And Susan isn't sculpting. Are you painting, really painting?"

He smokes fast, offers another drink...

"Susan is sculpting. We are both sculpting our child and our art center plans. What I paint now, I hide. I also hide as I learn to play the guitar..." Why must he hide what he paints?

"I am in no hurry to exhibit, as I used to be, hounded by contracts and pride. Now I am free. I paint private things. Somewhat erotic songs to life. Maybe I'll exhibit them some day. I don't know."

There's completeness so far in Loro's development. Family and Mother Earth help. And dreams. And the essential reserve mechanisms.

Sat. 725-4828. Paintings, and prints by Puerto Rican artists.
Current show: Group exposition by Puerto Rican artists.

GALERIA GUATIBIRI
Gonzalez and Gandara Sts., Santa Rita, Rio Piedras.

LA GALERIA
Callejon de la Capilla, Old San Juan.
Current show: Serigraphs by Maria Guadalupe

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.
Current show: Pre-Columbian Meso American Art.

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.

MUSEO DE ARTE
Universidad de Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras 764-0000, Ext. 2452 or 2456. Open Mon. to Fri. 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sat. and Sun., 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Current show: Latin-American prints from the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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: Institute print collection

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.;
Closed Tues. Current show: Paintings by Diogenes Ballester Rodriguez, Jorge L. Morales Torres and Henry Cabrera Serrano