

ART

Campeche And T

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In the search for an efficient definition of our creative ethos we have to enter into the not so very curious or strange duality of our society which is mostly paternal in its noises but maternal in its images, except when mothers sing their lullabies. We say "patria", no "materia" for our father-or-mother-land. "Patrimony" is what we inherit, but "matrimony" we do not; we have to work for matrimony.

Of course, since very old times, men were in charge of making the noises of "foreign relation," for consumption outside the home: the noises of "foreign relations," for conflicts, banking, law, etc. women were in charge of the cave or home, the growth and education of the children, plus, in their spare time, inventing agriculture and ceramics and helping the old men of the tribe develop medicine. More child-acculturating im-

ages grew up under mother's domain than in father's hunting range.

Mother is supposed to be a soft image of comprehension who spoils the male children; Then Father comes and demands more production from them, more discipline or law, or he puts them "in their place" in the scheme of things. Let's, start to see how this arrangement worked out in the case of painters Jose Campeche and Rafael Tufino: how they blossomed out initially and then dutifully put themselves "in their own place" in the absence of their father.

Could Campeche have produced more, hunted for more in his art: I believe so and the reasons I say so without knowing him are based on what contemporary reports say about him and the way they say it; plus on the miniaturist view of the world he had; plus on the finicky dutiful finish of his work and of his life; plus on our society's censoring mantle of sil-

ence, which can castrate a man, as it did Francisco Oller.

Campeche avoided making any lustful noise in life, he, a mulatto. Mulattoes normally are much more assertive in our society than he was. Our Rafael Tufino could have given him a lesson as a marvellously assertive person: But Campeche preferred to play it safe, both in his life and in his art. He sought the approval of Society, and of the baroque art cannons then in vogue in the provincial churches. No hunter was he, but only a sedentary villager of old San Juan, as many artists are today too, including Rafael Tufino.

At Campeche's time European Art was beginning to hark back to the old Greek-Image Banks, (Neo Classicism). Goya, the lustfull romantic painter, incorporated some of them plus other terrifying images of the ancestral mud-banks. Rich was he! Campeche continued dutifully with his Baroque saints and his portraits. He painted Marvellous portraits. He was among the best, if not the best, of his time. But his ill-drawn hands betray him as a lazy person. Painting from the nude was frowned-upon in his society. But hands are different. There was something about hands that eluded him (as they do quite a few of our portrait painters).

His father, Tomas Campeche, a liberated negro slave, married in 1734 to a lively white Canarian girl, Maria Jordan, who came from La Laguna on Tenerife Island. Very old La Laguna invites one to random walks: to communion with the Earth and water sprites, with the sea. Many years later in Puerto Rico Jose Campeche's only solace throughout life, morning and night, before and after work, was to ramble beyond San Juan's city walls, listening to the sea beyond.

The last will and testament of Campeche's mother paints a very moral portrait of her son. She was evidently very proud of him. Born in 1751, he was about 29 when his father Tomas died in 1780, and the son's taste and skill in painting made him the natural leader of the family clan, put him in charge of the family art and decoration workshop. Unmarried, he became the Universal Uncle, the father to alloof his mother's grandchildren. Quite symbolic: In matriarchal societies, the uncle or brother of the mother inherits the mother's children. Even now, in New York and Puerto Rico, in many mulatto or Puerto Rican families, a similar matriarchal relationship is established whenever the father dies or goes away. The mother holds the children together with the anxious help of one of her sons or brothers. Thus Campeche and Tufino are a-kin.

Furthermore, I wonder why Campeche didn't paint his mother's por-

trait, if only to exorcise himself. He never did as far as I know. Rafael Tufino's best painting is one of his far-seeing-anxious "Mother" her head alone (no hands), looking beyond the shoulders of her son in an epic atmosphere of grandeur, loneliness and painterly greys. Whenever I decry the greyishness of Puerto Rican painting, I set Tufino's "Mother" apart, for those greys are very colorful, modulated or quantified into a magnificent ambience. No just greys, but a state of the soul. Quite a tribute to the matriarchal goddess. Thus released, Tufino has married several times since then, and the colors he has used in his later paintings try to be colorful but are too much so, remain localized, not quantified or in ambience: a commitment has been lost, a silver chord broken maybe.

It is of interest that Campeche's most sonorous and lustfull painting was started soon after he established himself as head of his mother's clan, a few years after his father died. His father had been an artisan taskmaster to Campeche: the son's taste was finer than his father's all along. And by the time the father died, Paret y Alcazar, the Spanish painter, Goya's peer at the time, had already left Puerto Rico, leaving a "Rococo image" imprint on Campeche. So, as the head of his household he painted his "Lady on Horseback" independently of his father's old teachings. Also, he must have lusted a little for his "Amazon" — so much so that he painted a second version of her: trim-bodied Maja body, covered by touchable silks, sitting on leather covered by a touchable coverlet, atop a very erotic forward-thrusting black paso-fino horse. The horse's tail is ribbon-bedecked, the mane is carelessly braided, each braid twice-adorned with ribbony bows. Only a preening male would think of it, or the coy bright-dark-eyed Amazon.

After that moment of life Campeche painted many "Purgatories" (Souls in Suffering) plus many versions of the "Holy Family" and the "Mother and Child," various saints, historical pictures and some excellent official portraits. These are mostly of men in high office, civilian and ecclesiastical.

Among his portraits is that of another lady he painted in 1792, seven years after the lusty "Amazon". He was 41 years old when he painted "Dona Maria Martinez de Carvajal", a handsome woman but used as a clothes-horse. Campeche delights in the finicky details and the touchability of her be-ribboned sculptured dress (the body is very deeply underneath the outward sheath). He also delights in her be-plummed hat sitting on top of her outsized wig. Touchable too are the furniture details. Her physical fully-clothed presence in the picture is more definite than the elfin quality of the "Amazon", which has more air



Jose Campeche's "Dama A Caballo"

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around her. His miniaturist's delight in the localized parts of the picture (Rococo influence) acts sometimes to the detriment of the larger picture itself: very real credible details exist in an unreal world. It is this touchable credibility in localized details which seems to attract and discharge Campeche's repressed lustfulness.

Art is an EX-pressed embodiment of a pressure or emotion of the self. Campeche expressed his repressed inner lust through the end of the brush: thus he touched his "Amazon" as he touched "Dona Maria", as he touched gentlemen's vests, hats, or knick-knacks on a table; as he touched the musical oboe with its thin, penetrating plaintive note in church from 1783, until his death in 1809; and as he rammed a billard cue after his day's work and supper every night. Billiards "relaxed his members, nerved by the mechanism of the profession" is how Alejandro Tapia describes Campeche's disciplined daily schedule. "Enervated" implies feminine debility in a patriarchal society such as Tapia's; "mechanism of the profession" is a hell of a way to describe the painting act. Unless Tapia meant to stress Campeche's absolute-slave-like dedication day-to-day to his art. Dutiful Campeche! Working so hard! Which is exactly what we are stressing about Puerto Rican art in general. We are working "it" to death instead of lusting with "her."

"Campeche never played...He was such a good son...A sedentary villager was he, who 'knew his place!' — such is our society's lullaby.

Rafael Tufino has always played. He is not inhibited most times in his life or in his work. Like Campeche, he is a handsome man, lovable to everyone, and respected as an artist by all of us. His lustful life-song is heard in many of his works. To Campeche's accepted Colonial imagery, Tufino has added the by now very acceptable negroid art images, plus here and there our Indian art images, plus modern art's. He has thus been in command of a much richer repertoire of images than Campeche. Has he used them well?

No, he hasn't not yet. Not completely yet. Those he has used he has used literally, photographically almost: a santo is a santo in his paintings, not a life-force or metaphor. A dancing negress is a dancing bed-partner, not his Great-Mother-goddess-image dancing because the world is born. An Indian is an Indian, ethnographically, not the resultant spirit of a geography forming a native son. He is one of our few artists who dares to use strong colors, but they are mostly localized (except in his "Mother's" song): a rose is red, a sky is blue, his wife is blond, his leaves are green, all very much according to an anecdotic literary reality, but not as in myth and

prophecy. A flower could be green and the leaves red if necessary for his cosmogony in a picture. But no, he is dutifully in earnest like Campeche, respectfull of the world and of tradition.

More rebellious and liberated than Campeche, Tefo's occasional solution to his problem is to go out and make a lot of noise drinking with his peers in old San Juan or in New York. He loves everybody then and everybody is happy with him, the spirit of the feast.

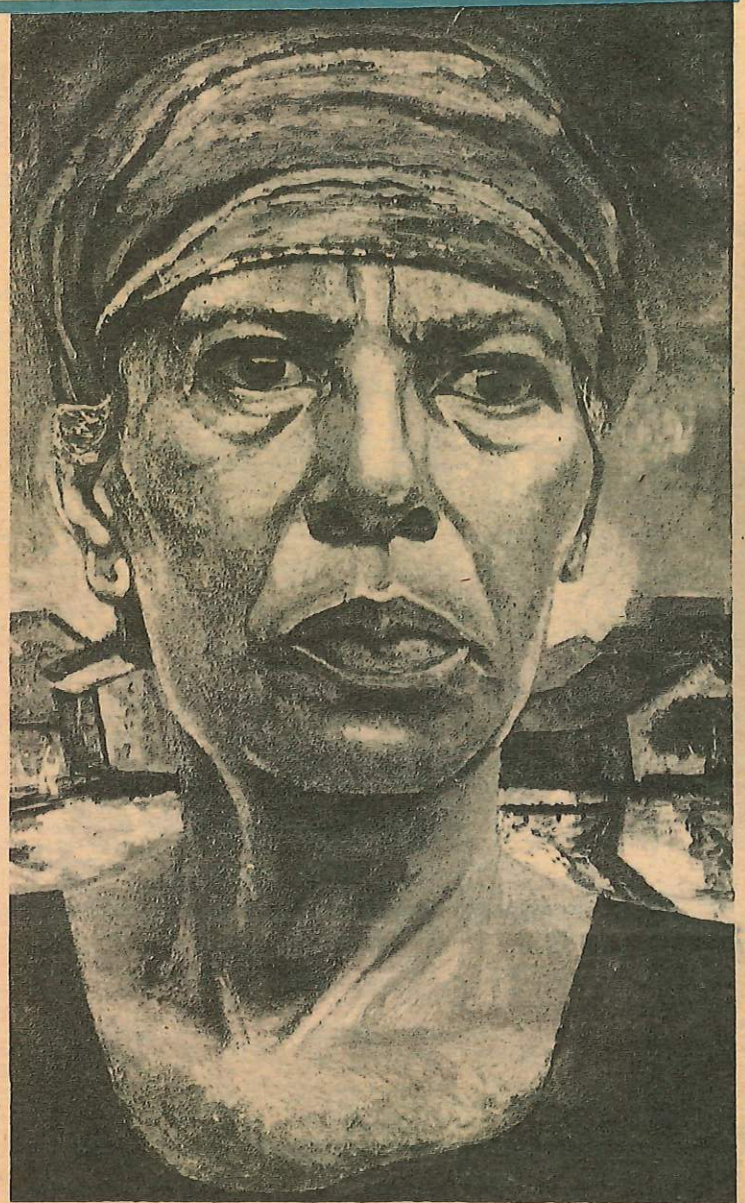
But then his known mantle of silence descends on him and he is alone. Surrounded by all his friends he is alone. He knows them not. And worst of all, in that moment he is not approving of himself. In a moment like this the other day he said he "won't paint anymore," that, "it was a childish dream all along"...So it is Tufino himself who draws the UN-approving mantle of silence around the artist, in him; that silence which castrated Oller last century at the Ateneo.

Tufino once got out of this self-deprecating tendency by inventing "suicide with a revolver, shooting paper-bullets of different color each, (yellow, red, green, blue, purple), bullets-entering" into him. He will invent some other beautiful way of cheating the reaper and of painting again, for he is a spirit of life, not of death. But what causes the mantle of silence?

"I didn't think I was prepared", he gave me as the reason for not accepting a teaching position at our Fine Arts Department at U.P.R. He had been hired, class schedules had been arranged for him to start in an August late in the '50's. Tufino was then about 40 years old, in his mid-prime. But he didn't accept. I thought it was because at the time many artists were boycotting UPR due to Jaime Benitez, The Chancellor, naming the U.P.R. Museum, the "Munoz Rivera Art Museum". A faux pas, forced on Benitez by "Munoz Rivera Centenary" commitments and Munoz Marin's frowning on him just then. "But no", affirmed Tufino, "politics really had nothing to do with my decision not to accept. It's just that, being a professor is a very serious thing, you have to know a lot. I had had only an eighth grade education, and how could I communicate properly with my students if I felt that way?"

What a wonderful sense of duty and respect! But how misguided! He has read a lot, is curious about life, can communicate his curiosity...What else is needed?

So Tufino never taught at the University, out of respect. I am sure he could have communicated beautifully with the students — but he didn't think so. In all seriousness he didn't think so...As in all Greek tragedies, he didn't think so, therefore it came



Rafael Tufino's "Goyita"

to happen so. Out of respect. Atavic respect: he and Campeche "had learned to keep their place."

In our island, all artists are too respectful about what art or a professorship or such things mean in our society. "It is hallowed grounds, hush!" We have to question this basic enslaving belief this, "hallowed stuff syndrome. Society itself has to be questioned, especially when it cannibalizes its good sons by demanding respect to itself and not to what is best within them. It is what is best within them that our country needs. What we can demand of from a dutiful slave is always second best.

The following report went to Spain about Campeche's paintings of the King and Queen when Charles IV has inaugurated in 1789: "They were made by a Negro's son...It is a virtue that a youth of his dark color, quality and class, without teachers, only his wits, can do the little he does do.

But nobody has approved that he be called the inimitable painter Jose Campeche".

It is true that the author of the report was a vengeful office-seeker from Spain who was later sent back. But how many reports go out of Puerto Rico today to Washington and other countries, informing them of our accomplishments in the same tone of voice: We see cannibalism at work. It is thus that our artist and citizens are taught "to keep to their place."

It is one thing to get to know ourselves as we are, to report the truth as it is seen, to show discontent because we know we can do better. All of us have to get rid of our hangups, preferably by painting them or their sources.

But it is another thing "to keep a person in his place." Or Puerto Rico "in its place."

Our place is with the stars.

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