

PHOTOGRAPHY



Maria Martinez Canas



Jorge Garcia Garcia



Hector Mendez Caratini

By **FELIX BONILLA NORAT**
STAR Art Critic

Photography is coming of age, as a fine art in Puerto Rico, abetted by instruction courses such as those given at the universities, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture's Plastic Arts School and private schools such as the Aboy Academy and the Asociacion Fotografica de Puerto Rico. The latter has a reference library, studio for hire, and day and night courses, elementary and advanced. What else do you need to explore photography?

About 15 photographic exhibits have been held here since last June, including Harry Fridman's professional presentations at the Institute of Culture, several UNESCO shows at the Carnegie Library, the Silvia Calzada show at the Ponce and Caparra Gem Stores and Robert Leith's at the Aboy Gallery. Of these 15, seven are extant.

SILVIA CALZADA caught her reality and truth inside distorted mirrors, as if, wise for her age, she knows reality is a many-splendored thing, distorted by its mirrors in time and space. Her truth is the truth lurking in the unexpected. Her images are not "expected" or planned for mass consumption, though the unexpected can be very marketable.

ROBERT LEITH'S truth is the momentary glimpse into a soul when under stress. Such photography can be rape, according to Susan Sontag. (See story, page 9) an instant appropriation of a self. Men have been

killed for doing less than that in many tribes where a man's image can be possessed by evil spirits. But Leith's images are those of a hunter, a modern news reporter, fixing on the faces of Portuguese citizens as they absorb the tremendous news of changes in their government. It took rhythm, empathy and selflessness on the part of the photographer to capture such intimate almost naked selves in a moment of truth.

In the exhibits by three other photographers—Yoyo Boing (Luis A. Rivera) at the Carnegie Library and Maria Martinez-Canas and Jorge Garcia Garcia at Galeria Aboy—the three prove themselves hunters or reporters but not of big game. They all have a sense of composition but YOYO BOING'S grasp of the camera is steadier, his focus is sharper and deeper. All report on vacation lands here and in Europe with plenty of nice buildings, streets and people. Boing's trips were paid for by travel agencies, to produce pictures to make their paradises more believable. Boing has the saving grace of unpretentiousness. "I hope you all like them" he writes in the catalog.

Unpretentious too are the young people, MARIA MARTINEZ-CANAS and JORGE GARCIA GARCIA, at the Aboy Gallery. They are still in high school but they have been taking photos with their cameras for more than four years each, as their compositional sense shows. Their respective parents are visually oriented too. Jose

Martinez-Canas is a known art collector, while Eulogio Garcia has taken thousands of pictures himself. Jorge Garcia Garcia speaks "of his friend, the sea" and most of his pictures have to do with sea water, clouds, light effect, birds, tracks and boats by the shore, all of them not possessed by the Garcia hardware empire. His "Puerta de San Juan" in an inserted rectangle bespeaks of future compositional interests. Jorge works well with Maria as can be seen in two joint photos of the same subject "Vital 1 and 2" She is a huntress as she effortlessly arranges such views as "Silueta en una escalera" and "A Traves de la verja," and captures friends and Europe. She intends to push on to study at the Rhode Island School of Design where Susan Sontag's ideas will probably catch up with her.

Other young hunters exploring photography are now reporting on their first experience—the UPR students in the General Studies building in Rio Piedras, the Interamerican University students at Beverly Center in San German. Aboy's students at the Institute's Art School are planning their show now. And there are other such student exhibit. Sometimes they jolt a jaded viewer with their very fresh ideas and sometimes the jolt is caused by the shooting techniques on the hunt others by the search in the laboratory.

The beautifully rendered "Borinquen Petroglyphs" by Hector Mendez Cara-

tini, which were at the Archeology Museum behind the Tapia Theater for about two months and are now at the Colegio de Abogados, merit their popularity as instant culture for the elites and the masses. The grain of every design is in sharp focus, can almost be touched and makes us feel that we are in communion with reality—until we ask ourselves what its scale is in an actual landscape. Then we remember Susan Sontag's "semblance of knowledge" phrase and Andre Malsau's "Imaginary Museum," in which art works, huge and small, were the same size on each page, bringing forth uncanny feelings of unreality whenever the actual scale of the works was recalled.

But even then, since the petroglyph photos are the fruit of loving work, and all of them were done under natural light ("Natural light is most important for such work," the artist says) it took Mendez Caratini four years to finish them. He went to the sites afternoons and mornings for days during each of the four seasons and then came the laboratory work. Therefore there's magic attached to them and our people understand it. They are in tune with such a universe.

JOCHI MELERO'S world... is texture-laden too. But Melero's tonal sense is tremendously extended. It enables him to make his images bask in many multi-toned atmospheres, each with a distinct psychic connotation. He is a master at taking the pic-



Jochi Melero

tures at the time when a wall's or a stone-quarrey's textures are most descriptive.

But his forte is the laboratory. He is also a master at dodging, masking and flooding his papers under the enlarger until, let's say, one negative can come out as three different worlds on one single large piece of photographic paper. He treats each exposure separately, then washes the whole paper as one piece and

doesn't depend on individual development for the richness of his prints. It's a marvel of economy with maximum tonal results and great technical proficiency. No wonder some of his photographs remind us of those of the great photographers: assured, limpid, tactile, with atmospheres alive and simple subjects enriched.

Melero is 28. His first photo exhibit was at the UPR in 1969. His well

known photographer father Arturo Melero, had initiated him into the craft and wonder of the photo studio as a child. He earned a degree in biology at the UPR but went on to study the drawings and works of painters and musicians here and abroad. No wonder he is tonally so sophisticated. Then he studied cinematography in Italy for two years, and moved around. Now he is a photographer in the round.

We have no time here to pursue the many cognate things Melero can say about himself, photography, art, and the world. But his world does hang together in one piece, a sign of true development. He seems to have matured long before other artists of the same age. Melero is possibly a candidate for transcending our cultural medium, for being a universal artist in charge of great spectacles of mankind.

Semblances of Susan Sontag

According to Susan Sontag in her newest book "On Photography," (Farrar, Straus Giroux) the knowledge gained from still photographs is only "a semblance of knowledge." And taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape. Photographic images, she says, make us believe that "the world is more available than it really is."

Since an image is only an imitation, not an original but a copy, then experience or knowledge gained through such images is, to Ms. Sontag, "an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies. It is the most irresistible form of mental pollution."

We visual artists at large, not just photographers, have to take Ms. Sontag's iconoclastic speeches to heart. We are all image-makers, whether realistic or abstract or both. We may feel threatened by her philosophical diatribes but we must remember that she, the well known art and cultural critic, speaks out of love for the arts as she also speaks of man's search for reality. We are all on that search. Let's try to accompany her.

Should our image-laden temples fall down on us? We could rest our case on Susan

Sontag's own admission, "Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images." You know, a picture is worth a thousand words.

But she proceeds from there, "Philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our dependence on images by evoking the standard of an image-free way of apprehending the real." And continues, "The powers of photography have in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals."

Now we can see that Susan Sontag's worry is the moral worry about the distinction between truth and untruth. She wants "things" as distinct from "images," "originals" not "copies." She wants "real reality itself."

But her hope is too one-layered, because there is never an absolute reality nor is there one revealed truth or religion, or one scientific truth, or one poetic image or revelation. Plato is no longer the only arbiter in such "lasts." Everything depends on something else and everything is something else next to something else.

And in that misty many-layered world, the

only truth and reality is that man, such as Susan too, is groping for an anchor, as Plato was.

But Susan Sontag's worry remains in us. She is worried as we should be about our civilization's arts. They should be tests for the worth of that civilization. But are they? Every artist must face that question.

Any text on mass cultures tells us such cultures must produce in series or they die. But mass-production calls for mass consumption, and to assure such consumption, mass-promotional techniques are needed. Mass promotions use the "four-keyboard mass language"—music, concept, verb and image—in one package to solicit consumers for goods. But promoters don't stop there, and that's where they may fail any industrial civilization. They become an industry, and then they dare to mass-produce ersatz "culture" and "artists" too. The masses normally can not tell the difference, they consume what is served them to fill up the vacuums in their routine lives.

Thus art and culture have become rentable or marketable merchandise in our capitalist societies and dogma in closed societies. Both follow the laws of their respective markets. Those markets, then dare to become arbiters of cultural values, and

the values are not those of truth, beauty or goodness, but of marketability and conformism with what is available.

There is no future in such a scheme of culture.

It is suicide for an artist to collaborate with such a scheme. Are Puerto Rican artists collaborators with such a schematic culture?

Since photographers are the image makers who are most used by mass media to tempt consumers, Susan Sontag's book fixes on them. But actually, all of us visual artists have the same problem: do we produce what is marketable or what we love?

What we love can be marketable if it has human values, if it fills the vacuums in all of us, directly and without need of mass production techniques. All graphic artist including photographers can too easily fall into the mass-production temptation. Even painters and sculptors do it in the name of "reaching the masses with our art. We do it for them." But do they?

We should remember that the masses can love a lonely nightingale singing for his realm: the masses know about truth, too, as a child does when and if uncorrupted. Repeat: if uncorrupted.

—FELIX BONILLA NORAT