

ART

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

This is the Book of Rechany, of the House of Color in the Egyptian mariner.

In the beginning, after the Taino eclipse, there was official art darkness in Puerto Rico. The dreary emptiness was partly filled by such lights as the "Virgen de Belen" which came from northern Flanders to Spain to us around 1511. She begat bicentennial miracles against our English invaders in 1797 as countless unburnt copies of her image proclaim but she left or was stolen during the reign of Hernandez to wean us from our extreme suckling attachments to her.

The official darkness was rent occasionally by metropolitan luminaries such as Ojeda and others in the 17th Century, Paret and others in the 18th, and countless more in the last two centuries. Easily come, easily gone. But they left some dreams and even genes and little bits of art here and there.

Of course, our common people didn't understand or recognize the official art darkness so they kept producing santos, and metal "milagros" as tokens of thanksgiving to the saints.

We also did produce simple furniture, without distortions with leather, and ceramics for home use, and painted chests and embroidered draperies for display during carnivals, lents and "nacimiento" days or whenever the voice of the turtle was heard. 'Twas done on austere budgets from ginger-and-leather sales.

Larger budgets plus "coys," "piraguas" and cigar-makers' strikes were eventually brought by tobacco, the Taino sacred-weed bequeathed to the white-man as an arm of wrathful vengeance. Then coffee and sugarcane also brought "pilones" and "molinos" plus "trapiches", quotas and cartels. Oh hark to the days of simple santo faith. When Puerto Rico's population was as Catano's today. No distortions then. No harassed shoppers such as now in Jorge Rechany's "La Compra."

'Twas in the 17th Century near San German in our southwest land of desert, salt, contrabandist coves, and piratical free-enterprise clans when petroleum was not split by CORCO, that our first known native painter was born. Manuel Garcia was his name, eclectic his style. A Mediterranean he was by descent — but with northernish bents. Did he mayhap study our Flemish "Virgen de la Belen" which was always mentioned by all Puerto Rican art teachers?

There is something of Rafael and of Martin Schongauer in his dutiful so-so works for the church.

Ever since then too many Puerto Rico painters including Rechany have produced eclectic works with dutiful loving care and many northernish trends. Ever since then there's been a distorting Goth in our art sharpening or focusing our inherited loose painterly contours and twisting our elegant Latin stances into grotesque turns of figure, as in Rechany's present works ("La Compra", "Cartero", "Piraguero", "Ejecutivo", "Pescador"); as in Lorenzo Homar's "Le Lo Lai" or "Disparate"; as in Augusto Marin's or Carlos Raquel Rivera's many figurations. Even our younger artists sharpen the contours or distort and twist figures schematically, call it, though not quite expressionistically. I who suckled under Piero de la Francesca find myself also under the spell of the Goth.

"Tis the fault of the Flemish Virgin. I learnt from her as did so many others in our tender youths. Let's burn her!"

"Too late, she left already."

"But Northernish winds blow on our land as of now, deaf to the knells of our doves and our clans."

"Gothic trends, yes. But do we have to recognize them? Our common people never did recognize official darkness. They kept producing their simple loving works. Can we if we are elites? Must we distort in such schematic manners? Schemas breed in complicated minds."

"I am not programmed to distort the figure," Rechany tells me. "I distort only when it is necessary. I am not cruel when I do it, as some people tell me — such cruelty is in their minds only. Nor do I seek such poses for humorous reasons, I am never 'chistoso'. What I seek is to penetrate into the soul of the personages. This 'Cartero' for example. What does his figure say to me as he goes under the sun along that yellow line? My 'Cartero' stumbled — and that was it. Here he is, done afterwards from memory. The same way with 'Ejecutivo', 'Piraguero' and the others."

"I like the colors," I told him, "but the poses do seem anecdotic to me; flitting, unstudied."

"They are not anecdotic because they represent much preliminary study and experiencing. They are not flitting because they suggest the past, the present and the future, all in one single moment and figure. I try to express lots of living experiences as economically as possible. Take the 'Piraguero.' Normally there would be

shadows under his cart, and details of the park behind him. I do not paint the details. I evoke them. The flat green background stands for the park, that yellow ochre is the ground, those daubs are his tennis shoes, etc. It is an expressionistic distortion of what I saw."

I can see he does express those things in his works. But I question his so-called "expressionism." He is rather in a simple process of abstraction from nature, as most Puerto Rican art is today. The flat color areas and his compositional schemes suggest abstract geometry.

What sets Rechany's work apart from the usually paso-fino-gaited-tonal variations of most Puerto Rican painters is his normally handsome color, except in a piece like "Juego de Ninos" where the color is too localized.

Notice "La Compra" with its lovely, tertiary violets and purplish-tans enlivened by the less tertiary complementary yellow of "la compra" itself inside the shopping cart. The austere color resonance added to the harassed body, umbrella and expression on the man's face set as if in a trance, create a vision of almost macabre lunacy a la Francis Bacon. Is the man disposing of a cadaver piece by piece not too far from the economically suggested sea? Do you want to go swimming or fishing in that beach and waters afterwards? Is this what shopping in supermarkets does to elderly men on Social Security? The small greyish daub of red on the ochre of the bag is a master touch of restraint. It could be blood. Such works decidedly go beyond mere illustrations of facts.

"I do a lot of scanning into the personages, inside their hearts, behind their defensive screens," Rechany tells me. "Then I try to capture them in a permanent moment. But since permanency is so relative, let's say I try to capture them in the most impressive moment, as in the movies but with one single still view."

I look at "En la Alcoba," a planal exercise with sophisticated black spatial divisions. A lighted rectangle in the upper part shows the heads and shoulders of three women, one white, one mulatto, one black. Are they the Three Graces? They could be standing behind a screen, or inside a closet at the end of a hall, or in a bordello. Or it could be a simple TV shot, a titillating semi-abstraction with double entendre.

Similar colorful mystery can be seen in "Sillon de Ayer." Inside an abandoned barbershop a scraggly barber chair has given up the ghost

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like some Francis Bacon furniture. A completely bald man's face looks through the otherwise empty window. He doesn't need barbering.

Born in 1914, now 62, Jorge Rechany is one of the artists who span the time after Oller's death, passing the light from Monche Frede to the social realists of the early fifties, and the poetic and symbolic realists of the late fifties and early sixties, but not quite joining the very geometric "far out" group of the late sixties. We are all now in the half-way house between realism and abstraction of one kind or another, together with the much younger New Generation. Offhand, let's see: Julio Acuna and myself are 64; Fran Cervoni, Lorenzo Homar and Bart Mayol are 63, Rechany is 62; Epifanio Irizarry is 61; Luisa Geigel and Torres Martino are 60. Then Osiris Delgado is 58, Augusto Marin 55, Rafael Tufino and Julio Rosado 54. Beyond climacterics? But we all look younger than we are, so art isn't so bad as a profession.

I asked Rechany: When did you start distorting your figures? He used to be quite a well-schooled paso-fino-academic impressionist initially, as Monche Frede was also at the end of his career. But then Rechany painted his unbalanced and strident "Mascaras de Loiza," in '56 when he was 42 and went to Mexico in '58.

"After Mexico and Italy I felt kind of rebellious," he confessed. "In 10 years I purified the strident colors, synthesized by drawing and began the planal and quite erotic distortions which I showed in my Washington OEA exhibit in 1973." He also got divorced in the same period and married Maria, his present wife, who found the now cold art review "Artes Visuales" and the Gallery on the Condado's Magdalena Avenue.

Rechany's first show in his wife's gallery will be open until March 15, Monday to Saturday from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M.

Now let's remember Rousseau's supposed comment to Picasso: "We are the two greatest; you in the Egyptian manner, I in the modern."

Somehow there is something Egyptian in Rechany's color and present "distortions." He, the white-haired Pharaoh!

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL

Carnegie Library Ponce de Leon Ave. Stop 1, Puerta de Tierra. 724-1046 Open Mon. to Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sat. 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Current show: "Hilografía" by Milan Suero.

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.

EL TRAPICHE GALLERY

200 Cristo St. San Juan. Open Tues. to Sat. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Current exhibit: A pictorial history of the sugar industry.

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.

GALERIAS DE LAS AMERICAS

152 Fortaleza Street 723-5787. 725-1455 Open

Tues. to Sat. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Current show: Works by Rafael Soriano

GALERIA DE LA CASA CAMPECHE

200 Calle San Sebastian Open Tues. to Sat. 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900

Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce. 725-2617 open 9-5 daily except Tuesday and Wednesday. Current show: Photographs by Brenda Alvarez Chiesa

GALERIA GUARAGUAO

Callejon de la Capilla Old San Juan. Current show: works by Eli Barreta

GALERIA GUATIBIRI

1003 Gonzalez Ave., Santa Rita Open Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to p.m.

GALERIA MARIA RECHANY

Magdalena 1363 Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mon. Sat. 725-4928. Paintings, and prints by Puerto Rican artists Current Show: Recent works Rechany

GALERIA PITIRRE

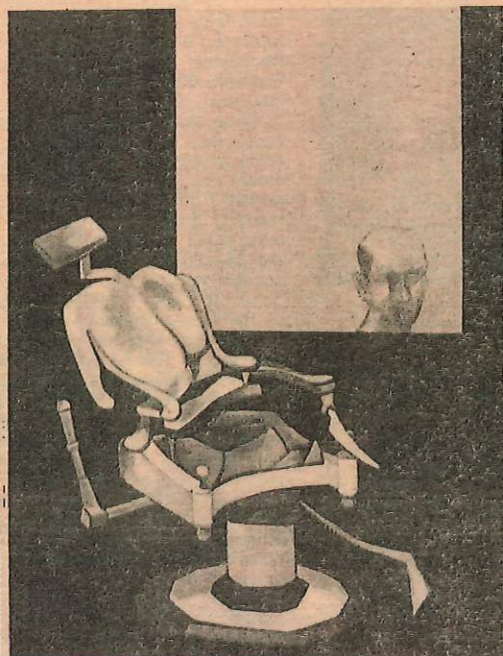
Condado Convention Center. 723-6090 E 1692. Open Tuesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Current show: Works by Jose Alcega and a collective show.

GE RECHANY

Photographed by Jose Garcia



"La compra"



"Sillon de ayer"



"El piraguero"



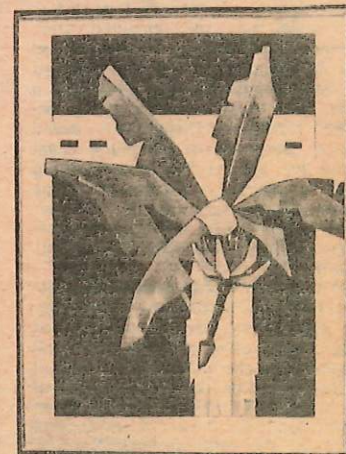
"Juego de niños"



"Dos gracias"



"Islena"



"El huerto"

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 "Indigenous motifs of Puerto Rican 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. Current show: Paintings by Luis Torres de la Haba (opens Friday)

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 Leonilda Gonzalez of Uruguay.

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: "The Three Faces of Puerto Rico." Photographs in color by Harry L. Fridman

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 Ramon A. tinez Montes.

MUSEO HISTORICO

1396 Giorgetti St. Santurce 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mon to Fri. Collection of art, history culture, industry, costumes, stamps, coins. Guides available.

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.

SALON ISABEL II

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

UPR MUSEUM

764-0000 Ext. 2452 or 2456. Open daily from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. weekdays; 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays 10 to 5. Current Show: Retrospective exhibitions of the works of George Korff. (1905-1975).