

NIERMAN

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

Leonardo Nierman's father came from politically volcanic Lithuania. His father met his mother in 1930 in politically, artistically and geologically volcanic Mexico, where Nierman was born in 1932. Now it can be "read" superficially that Nierman's paintings are volcanic in effect with ominous big birds rising in flight as the cosmos whirls behind them in disintegrating anguished curves.

Nierman himself doesn't mind this epic "reading" as suggested by the titles of his 36 paintings on display at the University of Puerto Rico Museum until May 20. There are three "Fuego Magicos," two "Craters," one "Birth of Fire," and a "Biblical," a "Cosmic" and an "Eternal" Fire. There are two "Ignition" and one "Solar Energy."

"That's why I became a fireman," Nierman interrupts my list. I like people who can laugh at themselves. His laugh has a curious breathless quality, as if bronchially short or as if at its end the child in him may be punished for levity. But he laughs just the same.

I keep on. Yes. Six kinds of "Winds" two "Tempests," one "Shipwreck," one "Sea," one "Meteor" and one "Asteroid" and an "Illusion" and a "Prophecy." Quite a complete universe," I told him.

"I wish I didn't have to put titles on my works," he smiles, "but art galleries and customs inspectors demand them. Titles come after the work is done. I never know what I am going to do next. I start work by disconnecting all intellectual controls; I become all-sensorial then. Each painting is a separate adventure. I begin to realize what I have done when it's almost finished then I may consciously correct or touch up here and there. As you notice I use a lot of transparent glazes, one over the other."

The students hang around avidly as he explains to all of us his use of a fan-shaped brush to drag the acrylic lacquer in whirling curves across the fine-grained hardboard background. When semi-dry, he can pull "hairs of color" from the lacquer colors, drag the "hairs" across other color masses and then spatter, spray or glaze them afterwards. It is a fine exposition of painting as an "automatic" play-with-the-painter's-materials. It is charming to see the many painterly effects close-up and we are delighted by his love for his materials, his understanding of their nature.

The trouble with such fine color and texture effects is that beyond a distance of 25 feet, they begin to dis-

appear into optical grays. Across the wide UPR hall what's seen is the "notan" (the tone-and-color, light-to-dark pattern), and it happens to be both simple and repetitive. The arcs and the areas of the contrasted whirling color swabs are similar in most of the works as are the light-to-dark relationships, most of which are highly contrasted from an almost-white through a few light blues and greens, to dark blues and reds glazed with burnt sienna. The burnt sienna is a homogenizer too.

But Nierman is searching for variety. His 1969 "Prismatic City" is not swabbed with the color. Webs of many iridescent fine lines create the effect of a city at night. A linear stream of meteors glistens opaquely in "Magic Fire." Curved pointed tongues of air-sprayed color, scythe-shaped and round light-modelled full-moons appear in many of his latest works, as in "Magic Fire," "Cosmic Rainbow" and "Cosmic Wind" done in 1977. Also some paintings have an over-all graininess of texture that separates them from others which produce more smooth metallic impacts.

In all of Nierman's "play-with-materials" paintings (unlike those by more cool and atmospheric Paul Jenkins) a very closed-up warm atmosphere (possibly due to the burnt sienna glazes) permeates the colors. The atmosphere seems to bode a future gas-attack on this cosmic world in flux. No wonder those bird shapes suggested by the arched swabs of paint fly around in disarray! No wonder some arcs turn into scythe shapes.

Nierman's world has a special angst, a special thirst. As Julio Cortazar says in his introduction to the book "Leonardo Nierman," published by Lublin Graphics in Connecticut, "He has an intuition of the Universe."

It is an anguished intuition bred by many Diasporas before him. It seems to be also his personal Diaspora. He walks, talks and acts as if in transit, eyer parting and greeting in such sweet sadness. Why the sadness? He is a worldly success as a painter, independent, 45 years old.

Those birds, I say to him, they keep turning up in your "automatic" paintings. Why do you let them?

"Yes, I know," he answers, "Firebirds are a symbol of the happiness of life, of man's obsession with liberty. Even if it only means liberty to get away from the wife for a little while," he adds mock-naughtily. "But I'd prefer not to impose my associations about my paintings over those any spectator may have. All the elements in those paintings are without logic. I work on them until I become

at the UPR Museum

unconscious of time, even with my eyes open all the time."
His eyes are softly tired as they gaze at those "birds" against the sky...

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"Mother," he used to importune her many time when was 7, according to Julio Cortazar's introduction, "Why do I get this feeling of both marvel and terror every time I look up at the blue sky? I smell salt then, and my ears hear the tremendous crash of crystals falling and breaking. Colors and glass-y facets lie around in the open sky." (as do the colors of his paintings now).

This mother never knew or could never tell him why.

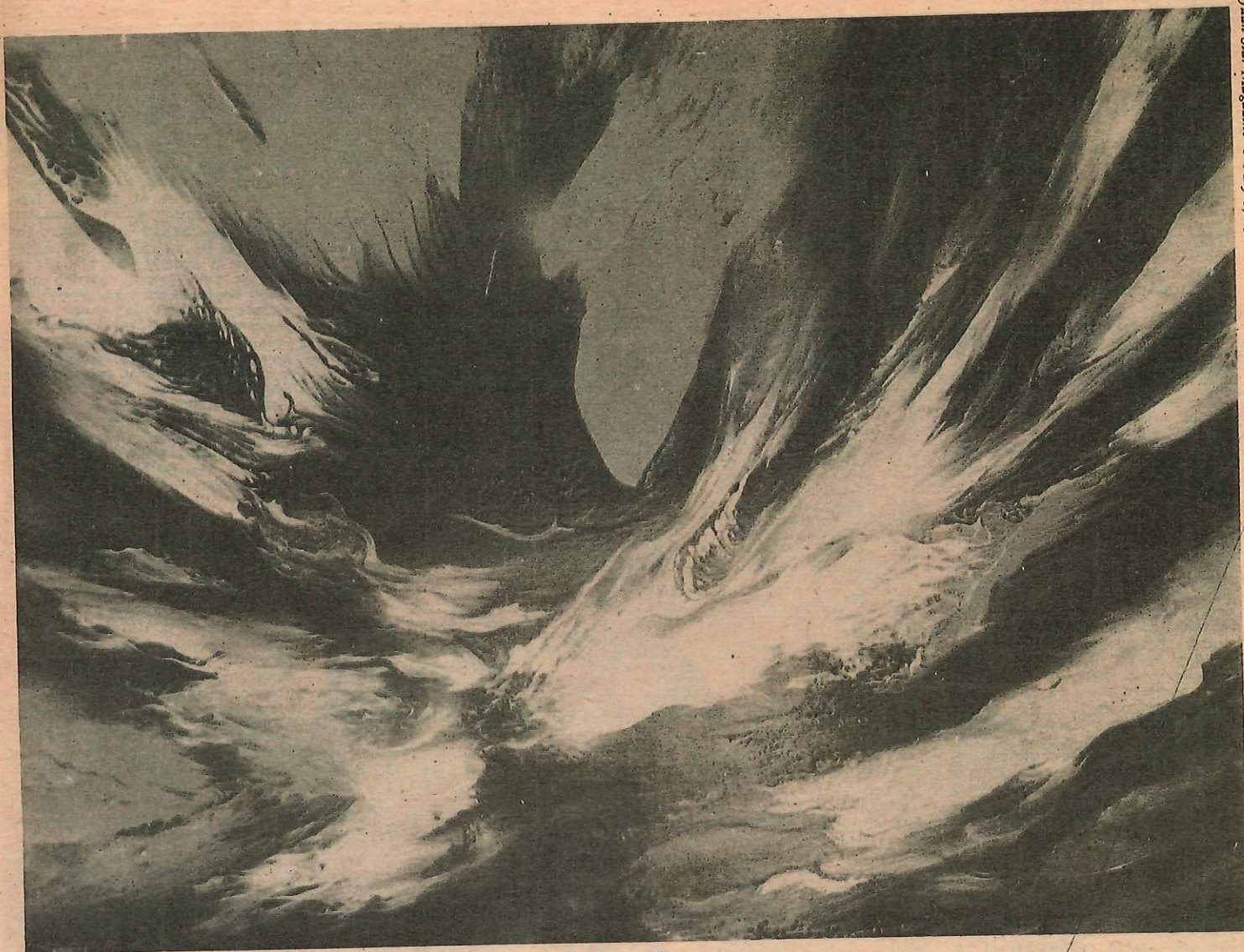
Nierman didn't know of Rembrandt when in 1952 he was a 20-year-old violinist. In 1951 he received a bachelors degree in the physico-mathematical sciences. Then he studied the psychology of color and form, both static and in movement. He claims he was unconscious when he started painting in 1952. He felt liberated then, and so cocky that he sent his fourth painting to the Guggenheim Museum in New York. It wasn't accepted but it opened up contacts for his first gallery show in New York.

In 1956 he painted a mural for the University of Mexico with biomorphic shapes influenced by Tanguy the surrealist. When I mentioned the social-realist tinge of the other Mexican University campus murals, he answered he was lucky that his mural didn't have to be approved by the Big Four establishment. He was then a student in the commerce faculty and the director of his school approved the sketches and the mural. Twenty-two years later he produced another mural for the Physics Building of Princeton University.

He has sold paintings to museums in Atlanta in '62; in Haifa, Israel, '63; Mexico and Boston '64; Rochester and New York '65; Phoenix '67; Bogota, El Paso, and Washington '68; Monaco '69; Santa Barbara '70; the Vatican '71; Detroit and Bogota '73; Honolulu and Madrid '73; Tucson '74; Palm Springs, Tel Aviv and Israel museums and the Washington Interamerican Bank in '75.

In '76 he created the "Peace" sculpture for the International Society of Journalists. His tapestries with so many reproductions of his paintings have been sold to the Tucson Art Center, Kennedy Center in Washington, and the Jerusalem National Center.

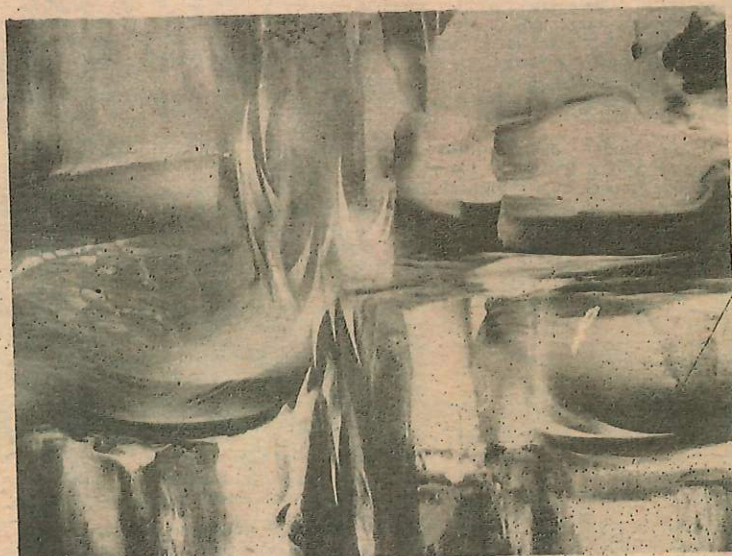
Quite a material success.
But every time he smiles he looks shyly upwards as if asking forgiveness for the levity.



"Genesis"



"Arco Iris Cosmico"



"Magic Fire"



"Sensación de Vuelo"