

Aug. 21, 1977
ART

The entire island is going to pot

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

Husbands and wives do it together most voluptuously; grandchild with grandparent most gleefully. Husbands like it even when they don't do it when their wives do it since working with clay keeps the psychiatrist away and psychiatrists are much more expensive. The clay people have invaded us. Is it good for you to knead clay too?

Massive clay philosophies may change the whole web of our society. We could go to pot in our innocent paradise of Puerto Rico. We have to investigate these clay people with their hundreds of kilns.

But don't worry, I am onto them. I shall sally forth to investigate. Wish me luck.

The clay invaders are sophisticated. Do you realize that if they have already installed a battery of several hundred large and small kilns in our island, then, at 10 potters using each kiln, that's at least 2,000 potters in Puerto Rico not counting students? They could take us over soon. And they are enlisting young and old all over in our schools and their schools.

And further, they are very sophisticated with their artistry. They are not merely potters, they also do large sculptures, and murals. It's amazing, I have seen them and am hypnotized by them.

Do you realize they have won John Balossi away from metal sculpturing? It sounds impossible, but a new dimension, fragility and a pregnant immobility, has been added to Balossi's figures of women and horses. These figures used to stand up so brazenly before in metal. Now they stand up so bravely, because they can fall down quickly. There it is a dimension that only clay

and glass can impart to a work of art. Only clay and glass can crash.

But there's another quality to ceramics. Each ceramic work can stand up to eternity in our acid atmospheres. Metal and stone will pit, wood will burn. Only clay and glass go unscathed. But the built-in instant-disposal quality of ceramics is very important. How sad forgotten paintings and sculptures look in cellars and attics. They are sad because they can't finally dispose of themselves. Yet millions are newly painted and sculpted every year.

This past weekend the Institute of Culture headquarters was invaded by a "Festival of Ceramics" and hundreds of people young and old were turned into addicts with the institute's approval. Then a ceramist Raul Acero took the Institute's Fine Art Museum on Cristo Street by storm and will hold it until August 28.

Acero is showing beautiful stoneware, porcelain, white clay and Raku technique pieces, all of them a marvel of free design strategy. And in the Condado Convention Center, 24 ceramists are holding down "Manos" gallery. "Manos" was a direct hit from the start and is going strong.

This last group was initially the "Studio Caparra" group, "the witches of Jaime Suarez" as they used to call themselves. Suarez, an architect, is now a teacher and leader for the clay people, along with Tony Hambleton, his mother Maribel Toro de Suarez and his sister Tere Suarez. Other original Studio Caparra ceramists are Rosita de Castro, Maria Elena Font, Silvia Blanco, Lorraine Martorell, Ana Giusti, Gilda Navarra and Telin Belaval. They also lured Mr. and Mrs. Jorge Cancio, Mr. and Mrs. Ramiro Pazmino, Mr. and Mrs. Gerry St.

Germaine and Balossi, Carlos Collazo and Antonio Miro. As a non-profit organization, they plan to lure internationally-known clay-people to come here as brain re-enforcers to give seminars, demonstrations and lectures.

You should see how people of all ages are lured by the voluptuous clay stuff. I tried playing with it, just to check scientifically and out came a young girl's torso accentuating the positive spaces. It was most appropriate for a green old man like me, so imagine what could come out if we weren't driven by science but by art. And then you should observe the kiln firing rituals. "My husband helps me with the kiln although he still has a taboo about helping with the kitchen range," Maria Elena Font tells me.

Mrs. Font looks young and pretty as she nears 50, is not coy at all about her age and is one of the original Caparra group. When I went to visit "Manos" she happened to be the very alert "member in attendance, a duty which is rotated amongst all Manos members."

"The ceramic kiln need not conflict with the kitchen range" Mrs. Font continues. "My husband's meals are served reasonably on time and on personalized ceramics. Of course, since I was born and was first educated in Costa Rica, I started early to sew, cook, embroider and do the other feminine manual training arts. Every young girl, rich or poor, did the same. Here in Puerto Rico, with industrialization, the poorer young girls quickly turn into high-paid specialists in the industrial factories and laboratories, so maybe they don't do some of the old things as much. But there is a fundamental need in all of us for such homey family art expressions. Clay is one such means of expression."

She hastens to add, "But it is not an elite expression

ART



Manos Gallery in the Condado Convention Center presents works by members of the Caparra Group and others as abstract art. The gallery is manned by members in rotation, so that visitors can receive knowledgeable answers to questions.

CRAFT



Tomas Diaz Rivera, pottery maker with a family workshop in Las Piedras, is featured on the "Manos Puertorriqueños" commercial. Don Tomas belongs to the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture artisan program; gives demonstrations at artisan's fairs throughout the island.

FAIR



The Institute of Culture held its first ceramics fair in its Old San Juan building where this young lady was an avid spectator.



The fair Susanna Espinosa runs a ceramics workshop in her Miramar home. Her ceramic murals are found throughout the island.

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL
Carnegie Library Ponce de Leon
Ave. Stop 1. Puerta de Tierra.
724-1048. Open Mon. to Fr. 9
a.m. to 9 p.m. Sat. 9 a.m. to
5:30 p.m.

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.
Current Show: The Art of the
watermark."

EL TRAPICHE GALLERY
200 Cristo St. San Juan. Open
Mon. to Sat. 10 to 12 and 1 to 4.
Sunday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Cur-
rent exhibit: "La postal Artistica
en Puerto Rico."

GALERIA BOTELLO
208 Cristo St. 723-9987
Prints, painting and sculpture,
mostly by Puerto Rican artists.

ALERIA COABEY
101 San Sebastian OSJ. current
Show: Drawings and graphics by
Rebecca Castrillo and Carlos
Suenos.

GALERIA CONDADO
Convention Center. Open 11-7

every day. 723-6090 Ex. 1636.
Exhibition of work by local ar-
tists.

**GALERIA DE LA CASA CAM-
PECHE**
200 Calle San Sebastian Open
Tues. to Sat. 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.
723-5252.

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900
Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce.

725-2617 open 9-5 daily except
Tuesday and Wednesday.

MANOS
Convention Center. Condado.
Contemporary ceramics by the
Caparra Studio.

GALERIA MARIA RECHANY
Magdalena 1363 Open 9 a.m. to
6 p.m. Mon. to Sat. 725-4828.

Paintings, and prints by Puerto
Rican artists.

GALERIA OLLER
Calle Escorial 366, Caparra Hts.
782-3171 Open Tues to Thurs.
11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Fri 2-9; Sat.
9-20 Paintings and Graphics by
Puerto Rican artists.

**HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF
PUERTO RICO**
1396 Georgetti, Santurce. Mon.

only-clay belongs to all of us, rich and poor. As a hobby or as a living, it is always a welcome art in the home. Every member of the family could help in the processing of it if it became necessary for a living. Very poor people can use the infinity of kilns already available to them in schools, private studios and caserios. In hundreds of places free classes are available, as is the technology for making cheap family kilns and the clay is abundant in many parts of the island.

"No, I don't know what possibilities exist for the wholesale exportation of ceramics from Puerto Rico. Here in Manos we do go for rare, quite elite original expression, handmade and imaginative. We have to train our people to our concept of ceramics. People come here — many are well-to-do — and after looking at our many pieces on display, they ask: But where are the ceramics? On being shown the terracotta pieces they find them too coarse and dull. On seeing the porcelain pieces — made from clay too, but baked at a higher temperature — they complain they are too full of holes or too irregular. In other words, they believe ceramics is only wholesale production of shiny regular dishes without holes in them and without additions such as hemp, wood or metal. They need to be educated."

I look at the many handsome pieces on the walls and on tables and boxes hanging around, even on the floor. No need to describe them verbally here. You better come, see and touch for yourself. Just remember ceramics can be eternal or they can easily break. They are always poised between life and death.

I enjoyed the various handsome statues by John Balossi, the mural plaques by Jaime Suarez and the amazing mixed-media touchable ensembles by Gerry

and Leticia St. Germain. The St. Germaines were so touched by the clay people's magic call they left Mayaguez and its University behind, to be here on the Manos bridge-head. Gerry also teaches at the UPR Extension division. In the show I also loved "Encuentro" by Bebita Pazmino (terracotta and hemp), "Se Secaron" by Jorge Cancio (terracotta and fibers) and the "Boquita Azul" plate by Susana Espinoza.

As I was leaving the Convention Hall I talked with its manager Jag Mehta, quite an interesting Indian. He tells me he is pleased with both "Manos" and "Pitirre" galleries; they pay a percentage of their sales instead of a fixed monthly rent. The Pitirre Gallery, under new management, is now called "Condado Gallery" and has started operations with an interesting assortment of young and "old" artists.

"Of course" Mehta continued, "We are losing money right and left on this Convention Center, but we are drawing the Puerto Rican people here right and left, into our many attractions, sometimes as many as 5,000 persons a night. You should see the traffic congestion. It's a full dress rehearsal for future occasions here when we hope to be making money. All considered we are on balance, the rest lies with the future."

Raul Acero's exhibit at the Institute Museum on Cristo Street is quite relaxing. His shapes are simple and free and the decoration, both painted and incised or sometimes in relief, is even freer, almost expressionistic. Beautiful glazes abound. Acero is quite expert at producing his own glaze-mixtures. A few Raku pieces with their nice charcoal greys, enliven the other colored pieces by contrast.

Raku is the Zen religious ritual name for a techni-

que wherein the ceramic piece is taken red-hot from the oven and is wrapped in a combustible material such as wood dust. The combustion affects the color oxides, reducing and reddening them but most important, it darkens the whole piece with nice permanent charcoal greys, if the piece is loosely wrapped; blacker greys if tightly packed, also if left under combustion for a longer time. The process ends when the piece is put into water which produces steam, quite spectacularly.

Acero, of Columbian origin but with his B.A. degree in ceramics from New York State University and his Master's degree from Ohio State University, teaches at San German's Inter-American. He tells me about 70 students of all ages take ceramics at IAU every single semester. The large propane gas kiln which can accommodate four-foot high sculptures was built by IAU students he claims. They are also building another kiln for salt glazing, an old German, yet now world-wide technique. Since plain salt, which gives such a nice instantaneous glaze to everything in an oven, also produces hydrochloric acid in the process and thus could eventually destroy the kiln itself, the students use sodium bicarbonate instead, which produces plain water and carbon dioxide as by-products. Better for the ecology.

So please forgive me, dear reader, if I failed to protect you from the clay-people but they are invincible, with potent medicines. So, ay bendito, if we are to be invaded as if by destiny, why not enjoy it? Learn to do it too. As Mrs. Font told me, you don't have to wait to be an artist.

HOBBY



Ceramist Agapito Sanchez is a mainstay of the UPR Extension Division ceramics program, which is greatly responsible for the ceramics explosion.



Ceramics classes at the San Juan Art Students League are filled first. Above sculptor-student Jorge Pollock works in clay.

FAMILY



Ceramics can be a family affair. Here mother and daughter, Iris and Irene Gonzalez work at the Extension Division.



The Suarez family advanced from home to hobby group (The Caparra Group) to gallery (Manos) and a business. Dilettante family head Maribel Suarez's pot above is done in the Raku technique.

EXHIBITION: Raul Acero



Raul Acero's exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts on Cristo St. presents ceramics as fine art. Above, top, "Bound" and below it, "Soledad."

(Photographed by Jose Garcia)

to Fri. 9 to 4. A summary of history of P.R. in antique objects.

MUSEO DE BELLAS ARTES
Instituto de Cultura 253 Cristo St. 723-2320. Open every day 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Oil, prints and graphics. Current show: Ceramics by Raul Acero.

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: "In honor of the Tainos of the Dominican Republic."

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.

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: Puerto Rican paintings.

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.

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: Starting Friday. Graphics by Jose Rosa.

LETTER

FELIX' FAULT

Felix is his name. Guilty of what? Guilty of ignorance. He insists on being ignorant. "Felix Culpa" (the title of my painting) is simply "the original sin" in Latin. Art critic Felix Bonilla translated "Felix Culpa" as "Happy Guilt." The Guilty Felix elaborates on the title of my painting to describe what he thought I was trying to say through my work. Ignorant he remains and will remain forever. Ignorant Felix.

Ha! Ha! Happy Guilt!
Augusto Marin
San Juan