

Of style and substance at UPR

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Special to the STAR

The present exhibit of contemporary Puerto Rican paintings at the UPR Museum merits your visit and is useful to illustrate what is style or dress and what is substance or flesh in art. Most of the artists represented are well known as are most of the present works.

The exhibit was put up at the UPR Chancellor's request for graduation day, when so many parents visit the UPR, and it continues to be open until the 16th of August. The works are owned mostly by the University, The Institute of Culture and the Ateneo, plus private collectors, but their quality isn't seen often, since we don't have any permanent Museum of Modern Art in Puerto Rico.

Let's hope this kind of exhibit at the UPR and the one to open soon at the Institute of Culture headquarters (August 19 until October 2) will become annual events: we painters need it.

Julio Rosado del Valle has two works in the present UPR show. They represent several kinds of painterly "substance" beyond the two styles present here of realism and biomorphic abstraction. First, there is their "plastic substance, or use of paint as touchable pigment; as tonal light-to-dark relationship, and as color. The color is limited, almost monochromatic gray-greens and gray-white, in his biomorphic composition "Sin Titulo," owned by Dr. Gustavo Candelas his sepia and terracottared figurative "Portrait of David" contains strange washed-out whitish highlights, dramatically impasted and dramatically located on the boy's cheek, collar and forearm.

Now comes the represented substance: In one work, quiet, light gray-green cells against a quiet, dark gray-green background which could be a culture medium, blown-up in size, macroscopically, not microscopically; in the other work, a dramatic haunting portrait-representation of a child. But the child has another "substance" added: the psychological impact of his figure, his hands going down as if in a silent sulk or as if striking against something annoying, his rebellious eyes hidden by the hair, his pouting mouth. And there is a further substance something which is normally seen ahead of everything else in an art work This is the all-over "abstract" gestalt of the picture, its hidden design, its pictorial form as such. The boy's space is seen slipping down and out of the picture, weighted by the heavy horizontal band of space above him. Thus the child, perhaps brattish, is threatened and seen tenderly by the painter.

Such psychological and representational or "realistic" substances added to the decided tactile plastic substance or credibility of the paint as pigment make the work a very good one. I am glad it was seen at the recent exhibit in honor of invited Rufino Tamayo, titled "Hommage to Latin Painting," held by San Salvador's "Patronato Pro-cultura" on the occasion of its Third San Salvador Music Festival. The other artists representing Puerto Rico were Myrna Baez with a figure in a garden and Francisco Rodon with his third "Borges" portrait, here now at UPR.

Rodon's third Borges portrait, titled "Solo Borges" is a powerful image of a face which is crumbling in our presence,

its spirit agonized as it floats free and away from a world in ruins. Even as it was first sketched hastily, this "Borges world" never existed really - only the substance of the face and spirit of Borges exists, but it is being invaded by imposed lines which are independent of the planes of the face. These willfully imposed yet tentative lines seem to act as a web of roots starting to feed on the flesh of Borges. That's quite a substance for a painting!

The style here is one of psychological realism mixed with abstract-expressionistic handling of paint, especially in the background. The fusion of the two styles is not quite complete, but it works reasonably well. Color is dramatically eliminated, the paint texture of "feel" is thin and a little tired, needing spattered outbursts for variety. The tonal black-to-white contrast is starkly and dramatically exaggerated as if to suggest a theater.

Rodon's style always had a theatrical dash, with those patches of color coming out of very dark yet brilliant backgrounds or contours in his still-lives and in his previously full-colored "psychological portraits." A full range of high lights; general lights and glancing lights is followed by various penumbras, then the umbras range from medium to very low or velvety black, including reflections in the shadows. Nowadays, his tonal scale is less subtle, has become starkly theatrical, as if he needed the extra force or the dramatic impact. The same need is suggested by his elimination of color, maybe because he almost abused it in his previous rooty landscapes and almost POP-style images of watchful girls surrounded, almost invaded, by rooty succulent gardens, wherein he all but eliminated his structural use of black. He has chosen and been chosen by old grand characters such as Borges, Munoz Marin and Ruben Dario, on their physical decline, but still with their aura of greatness, and he presents them as a director with loving attention to lighting and stage-placement, within the theater of his large canvasses. I respect these strong black-and-white works, but I much preferred his work in color. Rodon's toned color is beautiful.

Luis Hernandez Cruz has an abstract "Elegy to G.H." which is quite substantial, first because of its tactile quality, its good color and tonal values, its not-so-hidden design or pictorial form, (a red nucleus surrounded by browns surrounded by cool or bluish whites, tied from the outside by dark blue greens, in an uterine formation) and the further allegorical substance added by the title, "Elegy." Thus an abstract biomorphic style can easily suggest concrete organic shapes which become tender embrace or warm musical or poetic nostalgia involvement because of the title. A similar transmutation is seen in the long recent series of serigraphs and paintings to which Hernandez Cruz adds "Neolithi" connotations through his titles. With a little effort, they could become totemic representations, but he seems to shy away from the figure, prefers lyrical landscape or still-life derivations.

Augusto Marin is also given to allegorical representations of his personal quite substantial vital energies, such as in "Vulcano" here, with its nice plastic "substance" of cool soft blues offset by orangy lines to accentuate the invented



Julio Rosado del Valle's "Portrait of David."

anatomy of the represented athletic man. And better yet in "Feliz Culpa" (Happy Guilt), of an erotically cavoring couple, again with an invented anatomy, but this time, less accented, with finer textures and in low, almost too dark a tonal scheme. Somehow, the low contrast of the tonal scheme makes for a crepuscular atmosphere which negates the active eroticism. Feeling guilty seems to be part of the substance of this picture, though he insists on "Happy Guilt."

We wrote before about Lorenzo Homar's "Le Lo Lal." Its biggest substance is Homar's defense of the disinherited sad children singing as if not to cry, surrounded by their slum, enclosed by the Morro walls. The imperialists are not presented here — they are felt literally without allegorical allusions. Homar didn't need allegorical titles here - he attacked directly, quite substantially, even if color and tactile substance are not very good here, as they are in some of his painted alphabets and messages, his pictorial masterworks.

Homar's social realism is also seen in Carlos R. Rivera's oils, "Enchepada" with "Mala Entranita," though with surrealist and expressionistic overtones. The sub-

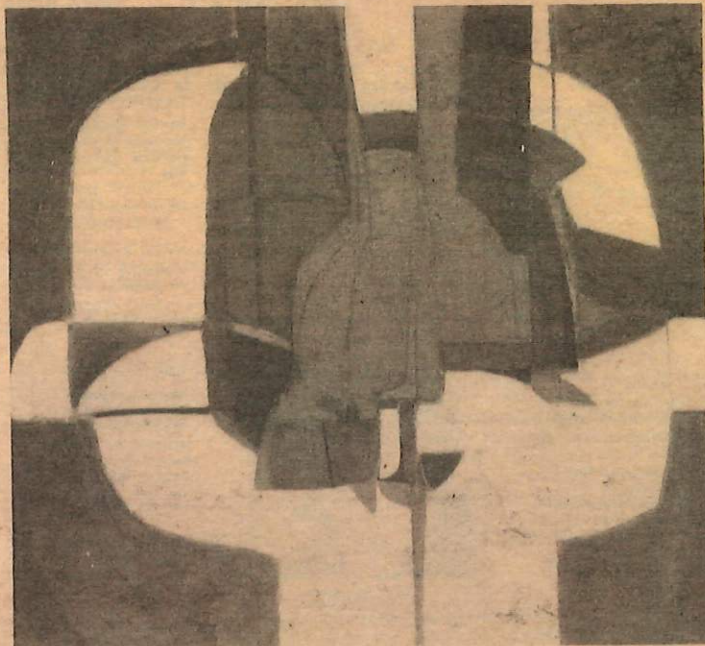
stance of the work is bitingly sarcastic as he pictures the two-faced "Enchepada" with its sullen look and the dollar bill flying from one of its mouths. Nails are stuck into it by the artist, as if in exorcism. Both works are quite linear in style, yet the effect is quite painterly even in the almost total absence of color.

I shall mention the work by Rafael C. Palacios, "Mujeres de Campana" because it is quite poor in plastic or tactile substance though strong in tonal contrast. He has much better works now and I still remember his black-and-white social realist compositions at the UPR in the middle 30's. His brother Francisco Palacios doesn't have Rafael's sophisticated compositional sweep, but always produces richer textural and colored effects in his paintings.

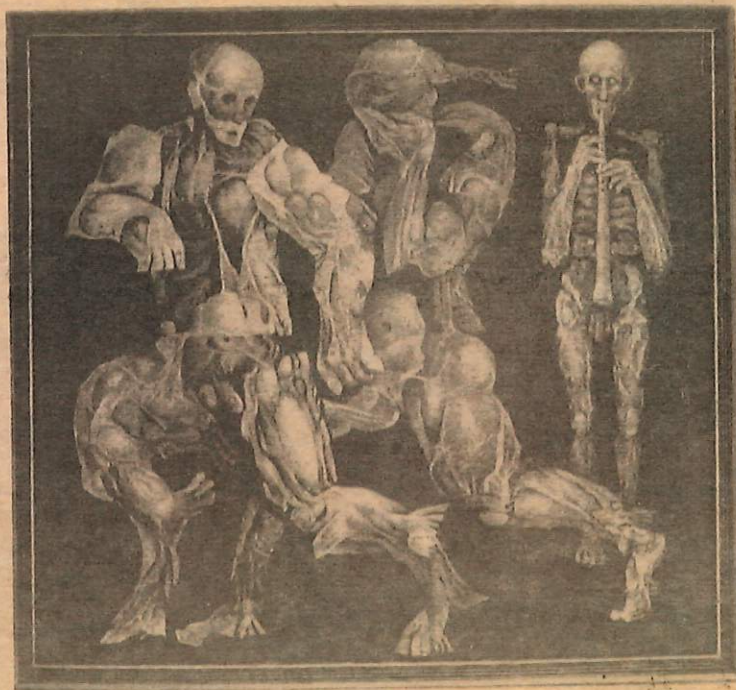
It was nice to see old-timers such as Jose R. Oliver's "Barriada" during election time, Julio Michelli's "El Diablo Rojo," the drawing by Juan R. Velazquez with its painted effects, and especially "Pordioseros de la Muerte" by Roberto Alberty, a sepi texturelogy wherein the white walks between the textured blocks suddenly become watchful serpents.



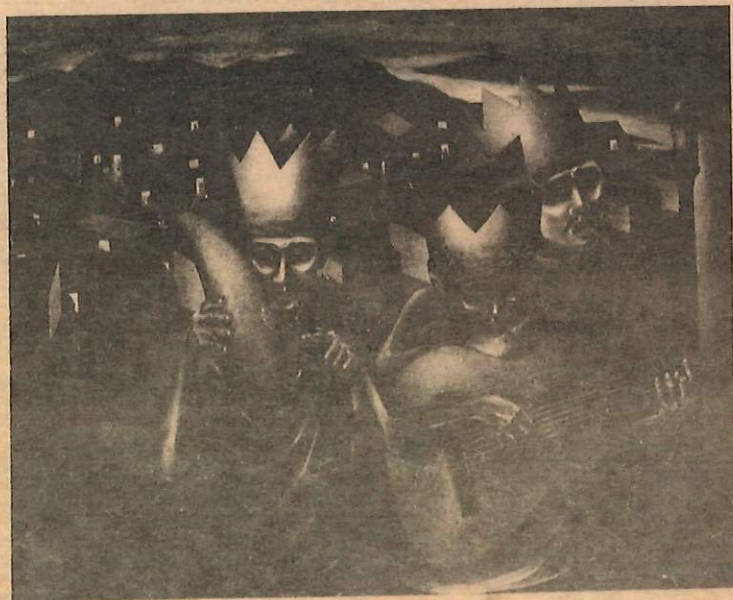
Francisco Rodon's "Solo Borges."



Luis Hernandez Cruz' "Elegy to G.H."



Augusto Marin's "Happy Gullit."



Lorenzo Homar's "Le Lo Lal."

Photographed by Rafael H. Trias