

# The message is the message

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Special to the STAR

Form's not Jose Rosa's real message, as can be seen in his one-man exhibit of 22 drawings and 45 graphics now at the University of Puerto Rico Museum. It is the hand lettered text which is the message and the really significant content of his otherwise simple and adequate forms.

You never saw such graphics. They cannot be seen unless they are read, and to read them you need a dramamine pill or you'll get seasick, the lines curve around so into every nook and cranny between his simple flat figures, serving as their flat background. The text also weaves or embroiders itself into a border of larger letters which also form the titles. These titles go all around Rosa's flat platter-like designs, enclosing them as in old simple wall hangings.

It is the flatness of Rosa's figures and their being parallel with the picture plane which recalls or silver-platter style ornamentation and simple modern art ideals of planarity. He is not baroque, as he has been called, because except for his 1971 "La Muerte Alada" serigraph, all his spatial arrangements evade deep space with its diagonal thrusts. He follows Homar and many other Puerto Rican artists in similar front-facing graphic work. Homar, however, is Baroque in his paintings and as he is in his black and white graphics for "Claridad" with their emphasis on diagonals, foreshortenings and strong "illuminations."

Rosa's works are really tapestry designs, ready to be blown up to wall size, woven, embroidered and hung up according to saint's day (Saint San Jose, Saint San Cocho, Saint sandwich, Saint Hot Dog), patriarch's day ("Hostos," "Betances") or according to the drink of the day ("Botellas" and "Jarros"). For special occasions you can have his two hold-ups ("Manos Arriba" or "Asalto") both prize-quality drawings. Or else hang his witty virulent scenes with many examples of San Juan characters in devious and dubious interwoven comings and goings.

Each design is like a drink drunk by Rosa in honor of a day, person or occasion. I don't know if he drinks — but his text sparkles with fermented spirit, is witty and sly on the draw. Jose Rosa shoots from the hip while at the same time he keeps his stream-of-consciousness volley of text, creating an assault on our minds on two levels: easy on the formal, tapestry design level and hard and fast on the message level.

The text level is not mere chatter. It catches our Puerto Rican soul with its ethos, pathos and especially its bathos. It reflects, in its comings and goings our ethical being and non-being, our pathetic striving and our fatalistic accepting. Our bathetic or ridiculous sense of humor, which Rosa reflects in big-city-tough slang, covers our existential doubts.

Something hurts in Rosa's soul as it hurts in our jibaro's soul, so both cover it with the quizzical wit and the cynical doubting refrains, to appear un-hurt to the eyes of the world.

Rosa in his humble city wise-guy way is doing something for his people by goodnaturally exaggerating their easy-going solutions for stress, while at the same



"San Hot-Dog"

time suggesting with a laugh that it might be better to act even at the risk of heart failure.

In his pedagogical enterprise, for credibility's sake, balance is needed. Rosa has it. He can smile wryly at his own clenched-fist heroes. Witness his "1873-1973" work, lettered underneath, "Because man is born free without chains," then bordered by "Blessed are those who hunger after our country's liberty because they shall be filled by Pepe the Thin Man."

Notice how he makes his point as he teaches history in his "El Asalto," (1976) drawing which reads, "June 20, 1976, Happy Dog Day, Joe, San Juan, P.R. From the fallen tree people make logs x the distance x the famous jump over the fence by the Governor x We do 'tru-tru' x three 'winds' for the Summit conference, Amen x 'The message is further stressed by the many linguistically erotic humans and animals cavorting in the design with leering tongues out."

His other assaulting drawing, "Manos Arriba," (1975) from the Jose Biascochea collection contains more history, "July 21, 1975. San Juan of Puerto Rico. An egg was worth a penny before, now it's worth an egg (or a testicle) to get the penny. One two three, bring the drinks. x Inesita says 'maybe Tursi admits coupons but

to me please you pay cash for my work. This is a hold-up in easy terms.'" "White woman, negro's perdition x Your coupons or your life. . . Please don't kill me, by my children who are my neighbor's. . . We steal gross or retail; you can pay on easy terms; my revolver is made in USA."

Another part of the very same drawing contains a surprising double-meaning attack against an art critic and a call for "immortal Lincoln to take three coupons and get a haircut."

The irrepressible text still goes on and on in this same drawing, and in every other work by Rosa. His figures and letters are always in a great hurry, as if marked off for a future plastic development which never comes, because another development ensues, another work is produced, as if Rosa, like nature itself, is afraid of a vacuum.

Why is Rosa afraid of a vacuum? Is he afraid his plastic form is not as good as this that of Homar who is his mentor?

Does he produce the running text for context, to make up for this lack?

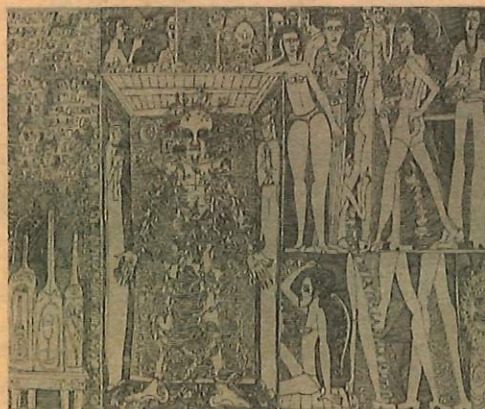
Nature immediately fills its emptiness with gases, flora and fauna and other forms of energy. Why does Rosa fill his tapestry designs, with text, figures and vines as the Persians fill their rugs with flowers, as the Moslems fill their decorations with arabesques? There are no filler-vines in the Bayeux Tapestry with the magnificent forward thrust of its horses and riders. But then, there is no large desert in Normandy. There are overpowering deserts in Arabia and Persia. Is there a desert in Rosa's heart?

I suggest Rosa look back to his unresolved "Muerte Alada" (1971) design with its baroque diagonal-space so unlike his present planar "tapestries." The "Muerte Alada" "composition is flawed by having two focal points of almost equal interest; their equal tensions joined by a diagonal thrust. Just for a lark, he should solve that particular problem but not by following the baroque Mexican-style pattern of his 1969 "Maestro," which fills the whole canvas with the figures, leaving no empty space for breathing.

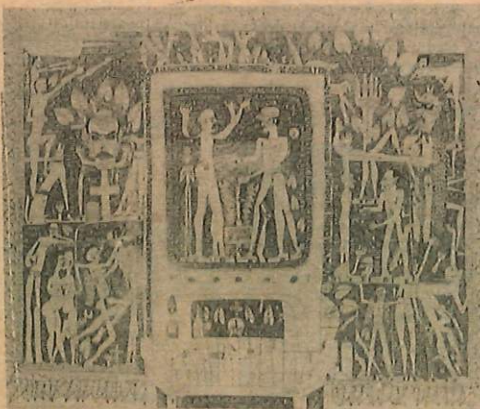
Tentatively, I suggest that Rosa seek breathing space for his figures but empty space has to be treated as fully plastic and credible and the figures in it have to be more plastic, too, and modelled, not flat as now. But that would change Rosa's style. We may not like a new Rosa, an artist on the hunt, venturing at his age when he has a sure thing on hand.

So Rosa is left, I am afraid, between two equal tensions. Art is both form and content, and each is as important as the other for classical art. He need not love classicism; it smacks of orthodoxy, anyway. But he must seek a better equation, starting with his zero point.

The Arabs invented thee zero, a concept of emptiness if to the left of the point and of immense riches if to the right of the number.



"Botellas"



"El asalto"



"La muerte alada"