

Oiling the arts

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

It is part of Mobil Oil's institutional image, especially lately, with so many watchful environmentalists, to come out strong for art. Maybe that's why the international concern bought the Container Corporation of America about a year ago. Container has been a well known sponsor of art contests and good typography since depression times.

I remember Container's important international art contests including the occasion when Narciso Dobal of Puerto Rico won the painting prize. Dobal's work came out in full color in countless art and business publications, the first time a Puerto Rican art work received so much publicity. Has any Puerto Rican art work had such an audience since?

And now Mobil Oil Caribe Inc. in Puerto Rico is mobilizing to buy and give prizes to possible art treasures being done by our young artists, just as I imagine it is mobilizing to get the old oily treasures under our seas — if they are there. Until such riches are found, let us accept Mobil's present bounty without regard to proper return percentages.

If such oil riches are found, we hope the oil companies, if not our island government, will devote a good amount toward a modern art museum if only to enjoy the satisfaction of spending in art at least part of what could have to be paid in taxes.

And what are we getting out of Mobil Caribe's present bounty?

A reasonably representative exhibit containing some 150 works by some 91 artists of what our "elderly youngsters" are doing now in Puerto Rico crowdedly hung in the smallish Ateneo gallery and the more airy Carnegie Library next door. The generous prizes drew almost 300 works by 145 artists.

Old-time prizes in inflation times are ridiculous. The Ateneo with its annual contests and scale of prizes, should take notice. Maybe a concurrent example should be followed. The Institute of Culture awarded no prizes in its present first annual show of painting and sculpture; it simply used whatever money it could get from the Banco de San Juan to buy (at their market price) some of the works selected by the jury which Banco de San Juan donated to the Institute.

The Royal Bank of Canada's seventh annual contest was held in early summer for the benefit of young artists (teenagers and very early twenties). Now comes the Mobil Oil first annual contest at the Ateneo for artists up to 30. In a short time, there will be the fifth

UNESCO Salon at the UPR for artists of any age. These three contests were founded and are organized every year by Antonio Molina who has kept his word about giving Puerto Rico consistent annual painting salons. He had previously helped organize other shows, which faltered on the way.

This year the Institute of Culture is picking up the gauntlet: Maria Somoza believes that the present very comprehensive "Muestra" of Puerto Rican Painting and Sculpture will become an annual event, just what painters and sculptors need to progress — to see each other's work in friendly competition at least twice a year once in the autumn at the Institute, then in spring at the UPR.

It is the educational function of annual art contests that I believe in. I thoroughly approve of the present Ateneo and Institute exhibits. The Institute has hung a lot of works. Some people say there are too many. The 150 works by 95 established artists at the Institute are generally of higher quality than those at the Ateneo by beginners.

The Mobil Oil Oil exhibit, like a comet, has its shiniest head at the Ateneo and its tail at the Carnegie. Mobil says it will continue the contest annually as a planetary event, not a comet.

Eclecticism is rampant as usual. Florid styles abound as they do in the Institute show. Styles or dress seems more important than substance of content in most of the works. Puerto Ricans like to dress up.

First prize of \$1,000 was awarded to Ismael Dieppa for his freely brushed paintings, a purplish-red, dark abstraction which suggests a tactile Baroque interior similar to some works done in the 60's by Rafael Colon Morales.

Let me complain here that the show catalog doesn't give titles for the works, it simply lists the names of the artists, in an unprecedented but reasonable order of quality, starting with authors of the prize winning works, then those selected for the Ateneo, then those left for the Carnegie Library. A sign at the Carnegie reads: "Prize winners at the Ateneo."

Titles can add substance to abstract paintings, such as "Elegy to the Spanish republic" by Robert Motherwell. Luis Hernandez Cruz knows the tactic. It doesn't matter that his titles may be invented after the works are painted, they express something important to the artist in direct connection with each work. "Concrete" artists can claim otherwise but "Untitled" as a title is lazy. Artists must communicate.

Second prize went to the drawings by Juan R. Velazquez, with their absolute command of the pencil

technique. There are painterly effects in his world of outside-wrappings behind which lurk eery unattached heads and grasping or pulling hands. Are those hands being punished for some sin? The works are definitive as they stand, unlike many items in our shows.

Third prize went to Manuel Garcia Fonteboa for his serigraphs with their command of grainy textures and figures and grounds woven into a poetic soft-colored world. His drawing in the show is strident in color and technique, almost scenographic.

Angel L. Rodriguez, the fourth prize winner, like first prize winner Ismael Dieppa, is a pure painter. But Rodriguez is disciplined and wary at work, almost anguished. He needs to loosen up, to paint for the hell of it as Dieppa does. His discipline may eventually give a better plastic quality to his work than Dieppa seems to master now. They should use each other as loyal enemies to grow together.

An acquisition prize for landscape was awarded to Myriam Sureda for her reasonably well handled, watercolor seascape with its not-so-well-painted bursting wave. I was surprised that few acceptable landscapes were entered in the contest. Don't we have nice landscapes in Puerto Rico? Do painters prefer air-conditioned studios and invented shapes? Cezanne would have considered us confused. We are confused.

Two honorable mentions were given. One of them went to Evelyn Colon for her various air brushed, photo realistic, pretty picture vignettes. They do have a Pop quality even in their repetitiveness and Kodak colors. The other honorable mention was for Arnaldo Roche for his only-one-of-its-kind "Portrait" of his mother. Roche used her as both model and painting brush. Her face and arms laden with paint, were used to print or paint those very same parts of the portrait, a spring-time expressionist composition.

Ramon Mendez continues to paint his sultry portraits, but they begin to look alike in treatment and pose. Carlos Suenos and Rebecca Castrillo are better seen at their present Coabey joint show. Nora Luz Rodriguez has a nice Pop composition with plumbing wrenches but it is not as well organized as her Royal Bank of Canada prize winning composition of sliding bolts. Daniel Lind has changed his once too-heavy palette and loosened his forms and color, daring to go into caricatures of his powerful subjects. Ramiro Pazmino has two excellent pencil studies of a charmed half-way world, literal and mysterious. Sandra Martinez has a powerful compositional and color sense. Marta Alvarez is doing some nice experiments with a minimalist reality.



First prize by Ismael Dieppa



Second prize by Juan R. Velazquez



An honorable mention to "Portrait of the Artist's Mother" by Arnaldo Roche.