



"Casa Rosa" by Julia Kelly

New life at

GUARAGUAO

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

New life can be felt this new year at Guaragua Gallery on the Callejon de la Capilla near San Francisco Church in old San Juan. It is there in the newly painted walls and in the

new works of its present collective exhibits, one of which, a modular work by Eli Barreto, hangs gaily from the ceiling.

The show itself will continue until the first week of February and then, with changes will go on into early March when an altogether new collec-

tive exhibit will be waiting. Or so Eugenio Alan tells me.

And I believe him.

"Are you the new boss?" I ask him.

"Oh my God no, I am just a member of the board of directors. I happen to be in attendance here in

their name, I happen to be here from day to day," he says.

From day to day Eugenio draws and paints right on the steps of the Centro Nacional de las Artes which houses the Gallery. He is a primitive in paints as yet and charges \$3 for a beginner's charcoal portrait, a buck or two more if it is in color, and does landscapes to taste, one of them an excellently designed, proud yet unusually discreet, flamboyant tree.

Inside in the exhibit, Eugenio has two very curious primitive paintings which sin in the primitive way: Every still-life object is seen in close-up as if for the first time in this world; each object is apart from its milieu and each has its own sense of scale. This is seen not so much in his timidly drawn portrait of "Agnes" with its dry brown colors but it is very obvious in his "Comprame Una," with the coyly smiling sales person. She is slightly better drawn and modeled than "Agnes" and curls against a badly painted background of awkward vertical strokes. But notice the "merchandise" in front of her. Each basketful of grain, vegetables or fruit is painted as if closely observed from nature. Each could be cut out and framed independently unto itself, a separate picture which is quite sophisticated, more so than the Haitian primitives because Eugenio prefers to paint such details as they are in life itself, whereas real primitives and children paint things as their minds know them to be.

Yes, how self-possessed Eugenio is. Yet so dutiful and earnest. He has to learn to unify the many parts of each picture into a single gestalt, a single global structure. He does unify the ruffled wills of demanding artists and gallery visitors, a daily chore, a needed chore in Puerto Rico's very atomized or partisan life. I feel impelled to test him. I become the devil's advocate.

Eugenio Alan, this place is called the National Center of the Arts, therefore we expect epic things from it. But such things have not happened so far?

"But they might; they might be," he says as he looks beyond me.

Why isn't the name changed to the Franciscan or the Capuchin Center of the Arts? The place would then be as it really is, truer to itself and true to the priest who organized it.

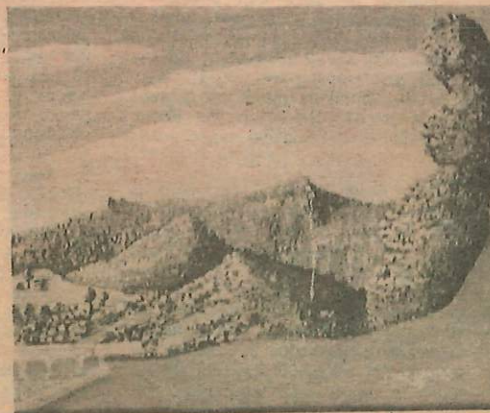
"But we try to be true... And the change you suggest would take time. Only the board can decide. It is they who decide. But what's in a name? What counts is the drive."

So I look at a hand-lettered sign outside by the steps leading to this hawk-named gallery. "Galeria del Callejon," the humble sign says, close to the ground next to Eugenio's humble drawings and pictures on display. Above the steps and affirmed high on the walls is the proudly lettered and official name "The National Center of the Arts."

What's in such status names? They call for men's prideful drives. But close to the ground is the sign of truth and reality, the day-to-day fight where the actual production is. There's a gap in between, that has to be tied. A single gestalt is needed to



a charcoal drawing by Luis Sanchez



"Verde de Gualajataca" by Julio Diaz Santos

ART

unify an art work, a single gestalt to unify people's lot. May Eugenio succeed in his part of the job.

Eli Barreto's colorful and gay modular shapes hanging from the ceiling demonstrate one of the many ways his serigraphed units can be presented to the eye. The various separate units, in editions of 50 to 100, consist of joined vari-colored squares. They can be arranged as sculptural kinetic hangings or under a frame in many layered and different compositions. All are quite attractive—at last. Many of his former frame modular experiments including one now on these walls were not as attractive or alive. I am happy to know he is showing the new ones in New York. Every month a small check arrives. We have to export our art, face the outside critics and be less ingrown for Puerto Rico's sake as it goes into the 21st. Century.

A happy thing: is that Luis G. Sanchez has abandoned the repetitive geometrized shapes of former pictures and presents an excellent charcoal drawing which suggests "Two Figures" in rhythmic almost freely curved interplay. If he can now paint such compositions with his usual quite shy but distinguished colors, he shall be on firm ground. He is a confirmed doubter and used to need the geometry for safety, I believe. Now he should square his shoulders and face whatever comes. He doesn't need to go into realistic biology for his shapes; his present, semi-abstract forms are quite sufficient.

Sufficiently biological or sensuously curved are the works by Juan Ramon Velazquez and by his wife, poetess Dalia Nieves, a beginner in the visual arts. She has given several recitals of her book of poems, "En la Calle" and her loose and free first picture of a blowsy red haired girl was sold right away to a gallery in Washington, one of those happy turns which can decide careers. Now an empty space on the wall waits for her second effort, may it grow into the hundreds.

As for Juan Ramon's "Hom-brecito" it is an almost painterly work with smooth and discreet cool browns with reddish brown touches. I prefer his excellent and dramatic "Mago" now on view at the Coabey Gallery. Both pictures are as painterly as water color or washed inks can allow. Classic painterliness means transparency in the shadows and an impastoed presence in the light areas. Watercolor and washes deposit more pigment in the shadows than in the light areas, which depend on thin transparent washes over the white of the paper. But an artist must be true to his medium. Juan Ramon's is a watery kingdom, and he produces wonders with it.

(Speaking of the Coabey, may I parenthetically urge you to visit its anniversary collective show since it has some very happy works: landscapes by Jose R. Alicea, Analida Burgos and Lysette Rosado; a serigraph by Rafael Tufino, "Pelando Cocos," with a warm atmosphere tempered by cool greys; another by Manuel Hernandez Acevedo, "Casas en el Mangle" with beautiful blues and greens; an intaglio in wood by Isabel Bernal, titled "Gilmartin" in which an impastoed effect is produced by printing from the in-cut or in-tagliood

areas of the wood, not the raised areas as is the norm. Then there is an intaglio by Myrna Baez, "Nubarrones" in blue greys with touches of tertiary yellows. Many other fine prints complete the compact show.)

Continuing in Guaraguao Gallery, I was surprised by the quite painterly and baroque "Casa Rosa," one of two works by newcomer Julia Kelly. I like her freely brushed colors and frank compositions.

This business of newcomers is one of the nice things about the "Centro Nacional. It is an open society, artists come and go freely. Crossroads wiswom, prevents ingrown toenails. It also adds to our eclecticism in art as in cultural mores. The more the merrier even if Marta Traba considers it sinful.

Another newcomer is Ana Maria Gibbons whose sketch of a clowning girl clown too much although it is reasonably painterly and discreet in color. Much sterner is the work by Gloria Florit, especially her poster on the nationalist prisoners. Looser, perhaps too much so, and reasonably good in color are her "Marina" and "Viaje a Ponce."

Julio Diaz Santos, calle "Yuyo," is another Puerto Rican primitivist, especially in rural landscapes such as the very small, "Verde del Guajataca," with its strong design and loving detail. His urban streets and interiors are grayer and duller in finish.

Ernesto Gonzalez Acaba's rural landscape has a loosely "embroidered" foreground with flowers. The background is spatulaed, loosely brushed and also scratched. His two drawings have a nicer sense of stylistic and technical unity with their finely drawn lines. Caferino Diaz, now 17, began his studies with Carmelo Sobrino and is showing two pencil and pastel portraits in the process of growth.

A master draftsman and portraitist in his strong freely brushed ink drawings is Ernesto Torres as demonstrated by his "Portrait of a Girl" in black ink and washed. It seemed academic though as it hangs between the two already mentioned portraits in fuller ink colors by Juan Ramon Velazquez and Dalia Nieves. Also academic are the "Quebradilla" street scene and slum against multi-rise buildings by Luis G. Cajigas.

Carlos (Suenos) Ortiz had his expressive painting "Cemi-Cielo" totem in this show initially, but then sent it to the current Unesco Show where it won honorable mention. In its stead Suenos now has some good representative graphics and a drawing. Peter Gastambide's serigraphic monotypes of modular forms in orange and dark blue colors need more decisiveness in composition.

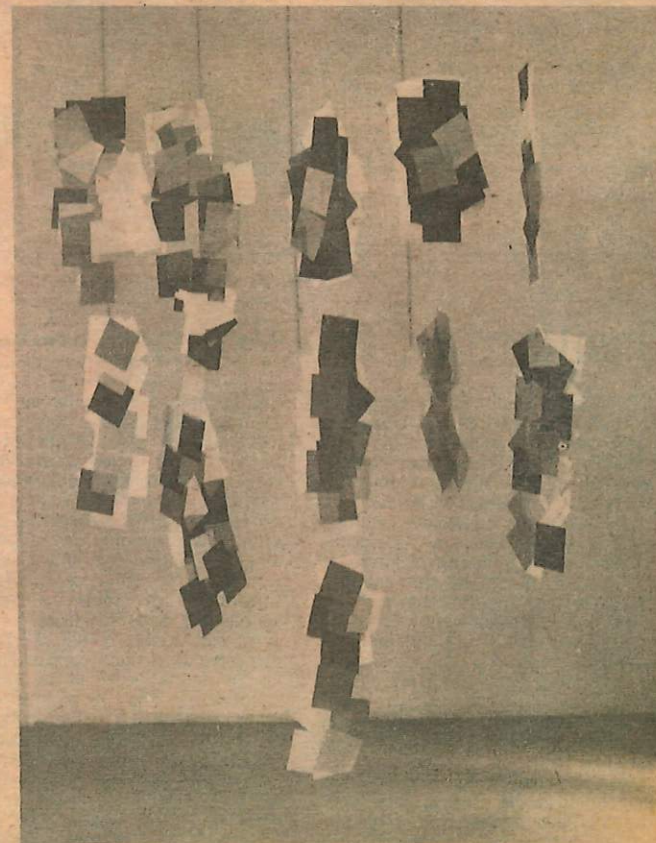
As you leave the show, notice the four-story building it is in, lent by the church. About 16 artist work here daily in the upper floors. Some of them give classes although San Juan has fewer children as it gets more restored apartments.

Which name do you read, the one on cardboard by the steps or the one on the wall? But if you meet Eugenio Alan as he draws or paints by the steps perhaps you'll catch his dream as I did. Status names do not matter. What matters is to work for a dream. Work for a humble dream day to day could be blessed by St. Francis.



"Portrait of a Girl" by Ernesto Torres

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOSE GARCIA



"Modulos Colgantes" by Eli Barreto