

ISAURA MERGAL



"Catedral"



"A solas"

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

At last we have two painting shows that dramatize color, the grand integrator of painting: Isaura Mergal's exhibit at the Oller Gallery and Felix Rodriguez Baez' exhibit at Casa Blanca. (Rodriguez Baez' exhibit will be reviewed next week.)

Miss Mergal, who has the reputation of being a "primitive" painter, is now showing some 30 works. Her color is the result of a sophisticated, creative desire, she says, "to know what to look at and to paint what should be there, not necessarily or exactly what is there." Such an aesthetic viewpoint results in the deep purple-blue shadows on the normally all white "Iglesia San Jose," a painting in the show.

If you don't see such deep purple

blues on the white walls, better go to your ophthalmologist or study impressionist paintings, or start your life anew, because you haven't lived. Start right now. Force yourself to perceive beyond what your eyes see. Cows can be purple or green or blue, depending.

Of course, you could quibble and say that most impressionists who know what to look for affirm that shadows on a warm white wall are blue because the sky lights them; or better yet, they are blue-violet, the complementary color of warm sun rays and not purple violet as Miss Mergal painted them. But she would claim that purple violet may not be there but it is what should be there given a blue sky, the lighted parts of the white walls, the gray blacklined plaza and green fronds in the rest of the picture. If such a sum calls for

purple, she might say, let it be there.

I wish the world would hold only what should be there. Then our heavily partisan politics and specialized painting would disappear and we would all glow in all the colors of one single color orchestra, bathed by one single dominant atmosphere and what a colorful people we could be, individualized as to colors but orchestrated by one dominant quantifying atmosphere or ambiance.

Notice that our so-called "primitive painter" Manuel Hernandez Acevedo is a naturally endowed colorist as is Miss Mergal. In other words, color is not an exact science. You have to intuit "what should be there" as Miss Mergal says and as quite a few primitives do. But what is primitivism in art? I tried to answer such a question in my two reviews on the Haitian paintings seen here last autumn. As

Marimar Benitez, director of Oller Gallery says in her introductory paragraphs in the Mergal catalog, "Isaura's painting seems simple at first glance with its 'primitive' style. It is a deceitful simplicity behind which lies a highly sophisticated chromatic sense. Chromatic harmonies seem simple after they are obtained."

I believe they are more often obtained under Isaura's aesthetic belief that one should paint the color that should be there, not what is there, at least until impressionist, quantum and other light theories can teach you what colors to use. Here I must emphasize that "pretty colors" are not what I am talking about. I mean colors that "glow together."

Isaura Mergal's marvelously glowing "Iglesia San Jose," another painting of the church which she showed recently at El Traphide gallery, has al-

Color: Sometimes it glows

In the review on these pages of Isaura Mergal's work and in subsequent reviews, I find that I have to use certain terms regarding color that should be properly understood.

Color is three things, each from different world with its own laws. Painting instruction textbooks present color as pigment or paint only; physics textbooks present it as light mostly and psychology textbooks as a sensation in our brain or sometimes as a pigmentary system.

There is no book that I know of anywhere, and I've looked, that gives a proper presentation of pigmented

color acted upon by light and then organized psychologically to account for such mental aberrations as balos and afterimages which are very active when observing pictures.

That's why students in color theory classes should be required to prepare quantified color circles, that is psychological color circles, each acted upon by a quantifying light. Psychological circles are built on the four basic color sensations which are red, blue, green and yellow, not the three-pigment primaries.

By quantifying light I mean one that is saturated with a given color that

subtly influences all colors under it, subtly changing them as under a "flow." I do not mean using a given pigment to add to all the other pigments used in the picture. This tactic functions sometimes with reds and green but never with violet-shaded blues and yellows which produce dusky green as pigments while as lights they produce white and as light on pigment they produce greyness. Nor do I mean using transparent glazes of a given color pigment to veil all the other color pigments and harmonize them wholesale. That too doesn't work all the time.

What I mean is to produce with pigments the effect that a dominant colored light produces on all the colors as they are painted in the picture. For example, a red light mixed with a green light additively produces yellow light in the theater, because both green and red have yellow in them and the yellow results as the sum of both lights. But if they were pigments the results would be subtracted: red and green would cancel each other out and produce a dark tertiary.

If on the other hand a red light fell on a green-painted area, the result would both add and subtract: the

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL

Carnegie Library Ponce de Leon Ave. Stop 1. Puerta de Tierra. 724-1046. Open Mon. to Fr. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sat. 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

CASA BLANCA MUSEO Casa Blanca. Entrance at end of Calle San Sebastian. Exhibition of works by Felix Rodriguez Baez, "Mariposas sueños y otras cosas."

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. The Art of the Calendar.

GALERIA BOTELLO

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

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. Current show: U.P.R. School of Architecture's "Six Graphic Arts Workshop Portfolios."

GALERIA COABEY

101 San Sebastian St., Old San Juan 723-1018.

GALERIA CONDADO

Convention Center, Open 11-7 every day. 723-6090 Ext 1632 Exhibition of work by local artists.

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900

Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce 725-2617 open 9-5 daily except Tuesday and Wednesday. Current show: Recent photographs by Pablo Cambo.

GALERIA W. LABIOSA

415 Sol St. San Juan. 724-6393 Open Mon to Fri. 1:30-5:30 p.m. Sat 9-5:30 p.m. Watercolors and other works by Labiosa.

GALERIA LA CALETA

70 Caleta de San Juan. Old San Juan. 723-8627. Paintings and prints by proprietor Luis Cajigas, ceramica, graphics and sculpture.

GALERIA MARIA RECHANY

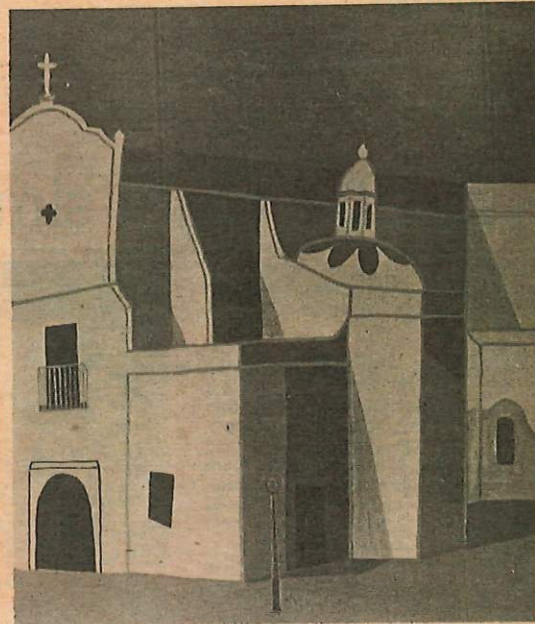
Magdalena 1363. Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mon. to Sat. 725-4828. Paintings, and prints by Puerto Rican artists.

GALERIA MUNICIPIO

City Hall, Old San Juan. Current show: Collective show by Puerto Rican artists.



"Capilla de Cristo"



"Iglesia San Jose"

Photographed by Eddle Crespo

most "optical painting" effects. That's another thing about these primitives they can easily enter into sophisticated painting vanguards.

They can also suggest psychological impressions of people and places, such as the ominously red and foreboding "Capilla del Cristo" here. "The chapel is prohibitive," Miss Mergal said of the picture, which exaggerates the closed-in shape and isolated red volume of the chapel rather than its complete architecture. Notice how simply the small gold and flower details on the altar dominate the picture and the embroidery of experienced reality she presents in the cobblestoned street effect.

In her "Plaza San Jose," another look at the same church, its white walls are yellow, she says, "because yellow is nicer against the blue sky and next to the grey-blue sculpture."

Such reasons are painterly reasons indeed, as is the yellow in "Cruz No 10," "because I was happy in the place." The yellow in "Cruz No. 10" is offset by black and white tiles on the floor and a Puerto Rican flag. The picture doesn't glow, however, maybe because the happiness is in the past tense, and each color's life is localized or apart.

Some pictures in the show are resolved tonally and with localized color. By localized I mean that each area has one single color, as on a territorial map. But the localized colors work well in "A Solas" with its two small figures sitting down low in the picture surrounded by a dark blue immensity of sky and sea and in "Soledad" where the salmon colored dress is against another blue immensity and a long maroon horizontal serves as a steadying base for the

lonely figure. Loneliness is also suggested by the single birds in many pictures including "Pescando" with its lonely fisherman on a wharf next to his tin cans. A lonely buoy and a lonely bird are solitary witnesses in the blue expanse again.

Another dark blue void reigns in "Guaypao," a part of La Perla which has been "wiped out" by the sea several times. In the poetic night-view here the lights of the houses seem to be fire-flies, very frail, yet always there even if wiped out at times. Such poetic insights into the spirit of her people are more constructive for our nationality than a thousand clenched fists.

Isaura's large serigraph, "Catedral," has localized color too. Yellow's dominant but there is a nice area with small color touches that vibrate well. Reds dominate "Callejon" and are

offset by blues and purples with black and white neutrals. Various "Payasos" are like quick sketches to clean her brushes.

Now we come to another "Callejon," this one in the catalog. The other was not. "It's a trial," Isaura says when I mention that her newly found emphasis in this painting on the realistic textures of Old San Juan houses—which only served to gray this picture. "I demand more and more from myself every day."

So she is pushing on to be a more complete professional. She wants to learn to paint what is there. This is against her usual aesthetic of painting what should be there. What can I say?

I read anxiety in her voice and in the picture. The road to professionalism is long. Such is human will.

Paradise here isn't paradise enough.

dark tertiary would have a mustardy glow. It is this kind of glow produced by the selected quantifying light which is missing in most paintings and is consistently missing in Puerto Rican art. There are exceptions: the old "landscape" abstractions by Luis Hernandez Cruz and Carmelo Fontanez, a few works by Manuel Hernandez, and some serigraphs by Lorenzo Homar. The glow is also seen in a few Gauguinesque landscapes by Angel Botello of the late forties, in some of the dusky cloud studies by don Monche Frade, in some touches in old watercolors by

Arroyo Gely, Fano Irizarry and Antonio Maldonado and in some paintings by Jorge Rechany and Fran Cervoni. These are slim pickings indeed.

Notice that the last six Puerto Ricans mentioned were trained in impressionism which does help but they miss the mark whenever they model their forms too solidly in the round or when they aim at highly contrasted effects, as most Puerto Rican painters do beginning with Homar, Rafael Tufino, Augusto Marin and Carlos R. Rivera.

Three dimensional modeling is a Baroque sin and highly contrasted ef-

fects are too gutsy to be easy on the eye. Baroque high contrast hits the eye, period, as most works by Ziqueiros of Mexico always do. Even Tamayo the great colorist loses color when he goes for high contrast and three dimensional modeling. The latter resources are more useful for combative posters and murals but not for good color effects and real murals. Murals should hug the wall and not hit the beholder's eye, since otherwise their mural size is abusive and the beholders "end" them in many ways, revengefully.

I surely hope there are other good

color painting touches in Puerto Rican art over and beyond those I mentioned above. The small Campeche "Lady on Horseback" almost made it, but the extra-round modeling stopped it. Of course, even Matisse, Tamayo, Gauguin and Cezanne failed many times in such a quest, as did the Fauves and now Vassarelli, but all of them have had sufficient hits to create a color drug addiction in all students of color. I can't do good color yet but I love it when I see it because then the world is beautiful and you don't have to eat for months.

—Felix Bonilla Norat

GALERIA OLLER

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

Current show: Paintings by Isaura Mergal

GALERIA RAQUEL

San Jose 257, Old San Juan. Mon. to Sat. 10-6; Sundays 1-6. Mostly oils by European artists.

HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF PUERTO RICO

1396 Georgetti, Santurce. Mon. to Fri. 9 to 4. A summary of history of P.R. in antique objects.

LA FORTALEZA

End of Fortaleza St., Old San Juan. Open only during business hours. Show: Collective exhibit in tribute to Dr. Jose R. Oliver.

MANOS

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

Current show: Ceramics by Breeze Griswold Sobek and a collective exhibition by member-artists.

MUSEO DE LA ESCUELA DE ARTES PLASTICAS

El Morro Grounds Mon. to Fri. 8 to 5. Sat. 2 to

5. Current show Works by Graphic arts students of Profs. Jose Alicea and Susana Herrero.

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.

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. Current show: "Album de familia y obra grafica" by Antonio Martorell

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. Current Show: Retrospective exhibition by Lorenzo Homar.

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. Saturday and Sundays, 10 to 5. Current show: 10th Annual Exhibit of Finer Arts Students Work.