

# MARTINIQUE

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT  
Special to the STAR

There is a show at Casa Blanca in Old San Juan for which we should be thankful. It is a discreet ambassadorial exchange without ruffles and flags, humble in its way but wholesome and I understand representative of the arts of our sister island of Martinique. Their basketwork is better than ours and their paintings, photography, and sculpture are on a par with our own.

The show refreshed our memories of Martinique's last ambassadorial art exchange in the middle fifties. This time their dancers, singers and poets added to the inauguration at Casa Blanca. We have Hector Campos Parsi to thank for the show. He travels on Institute of Culture exchanges in the Caribbean and has a knack for communication.

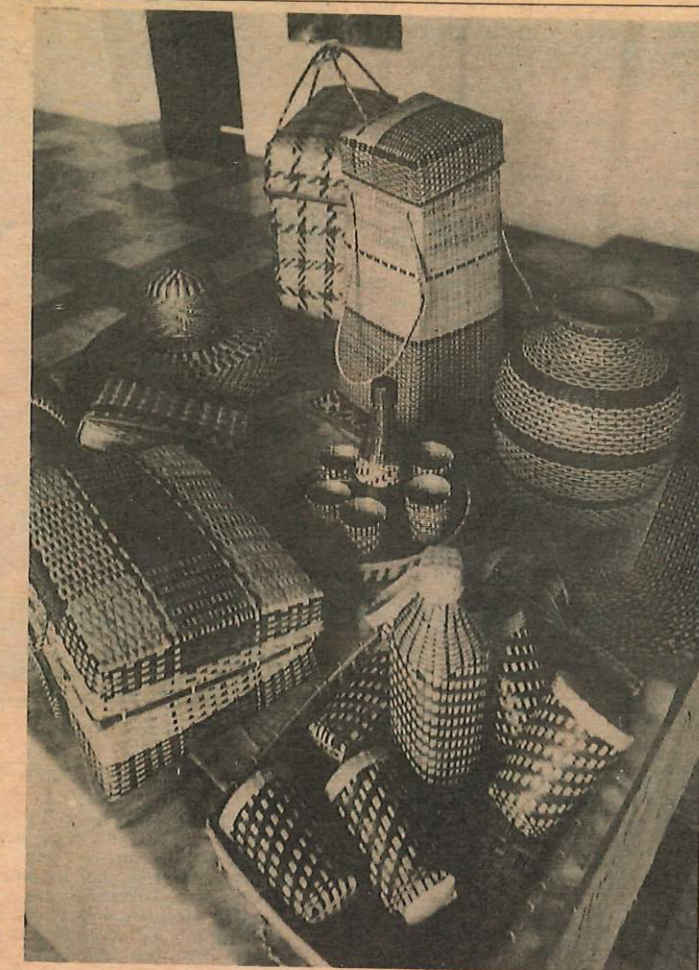
Martinique's art of weaving and plaiting baskets, mats and hats out of natural fibers merits attention because of its perfection. Our artisans in those fields come out second best in comparison. The design of most of our straw products is helter-skelter because our traditions have been lost several times and only regained artificially and agonizingly. Nobody in Puerto Rico bothered to cultivate the plants from which the straw, cane, bark or rushes come for use in weaving baskets and hats. Our wicker furniture has gone to Haiti.

The Martinicans and I understand the Dominicans too, have cultivated those plant sources of their raw materials since Indian times, a thousand years ago. Morne des Esses in Martinique was one of the last centers where Caribbean Indians gathered after "civilization" came from Europe. Bark and cachibon from those times are still found there as well as the bakoua used for the basket border work. The informative introduction to this show explains how the Martinican colors, black, maroon and plain straw-color - are all natural and not tinted.

The designs are distinguished and quite austere. The materials themselves decide the geometrical designs, depending on how they are woven. Nature and process decide on the geometry.

As a matter of fact, the whole Martinican show is austere. Paintings and sculptures are mostly in blacks, dull reds and ochres and dusty off-whites predominate in the weavings, paintings and sculptures. Certain greens and blues are missing from the paintings as if Pissarro and Gauguin never existed for the Martinicans. The only halfway exceptions are the batik paintings by Louis Laouchez, the dry surrealist paintings by Claud Perrot and the nicely composed color photographs by, I imagine, Henri Vigana.

I imagine, because the color photos were unsigned and unmarked on the



"Their basketwork is better than ours ..."

wall. The other photographer in the catalog, Louis Hagot, signed his black and white works floridly. These photos are of fishermen, water details and textured surfaces such as tree barks and cactus spines. So, the nicely composed color photographs must be Vigana's. They present simple natural scenes superimposed on other photos of geometrized light and halo effects to produce interesting nature and geometry combinations as if he too has a love for weaving opposites together.

The use of thesis and antithesis forms to arrive at a formal synthesis is as yet mostly unresolved in the art of both Puerto Rico and Martinique. Geometry stays as geometry and nature is not transcended either. Both sources of forms are reasonably combined, intellectually, through conscious willpower but they are not fused except in the basketry where geometry prevails.

Haiti's natural arts which we saw

this past year show a little more fusion of geometry into nature but it is the geometry of natural things as they are represented either in a primitive or realistic way, in such as houses and other man made objects or spaces. It is not the geometry of a willfulness for a style to represent man and nature in art with equal natural wholesomeness.

The Martinican groping for a classical fusion seems to be a Caribbean trait. Let's hope there is an art harvest some time, a real synthesis.

Marcel Pelage has four well-constructed sculptures in this show which also search for the synthesis. Geometry is implicit in his use of metal rods and metal laths but he chops them up too much and freely solders them resulting in something like nature's budding of cells so that the geometry is lost. There is an exception perhaps in his economical "Christ en Croix" where he used the least number of cut pieces. Pelage

could learn from John Balossi's cut metal and rod sculpture now at the Ponce Museum. It uses no bondo textures for its surface. Its metal geometrical parts remain starkly natural, as does the resultant figure; it is a good synthesis.

It is unfortunate that Pelage, the only sculptor in this Martinique show, does not appear in the catalog. The paintings are all quite eclectic and also austere in color. Yet they are very because of their contrasts, the textures are lively, perhaps too freely so and overabundant in some cases. Space is constructed by a kind of outward cellular growth, not by broad sweeps, as if reality were too close for comfort, as if the broad sea did not exist in the Caribbean. Why should the sea be so absent from Caribbean art?

Claude Perrot is the everpresent surrealist. He is poet too and his painting is too cerebralized. His cells become space ships and the pictures are adorned by too many garlands of details from memory and are not believable as reality. He should study the spatial and texture realities which the great surrealists produced in order to present their fantasies more believably. Autodidactic surrealism tires easily because of this lack of plastic credibility. Perrot does use many colors but so lightly that they turn into iridescent vapors. His "Edification" is formally more simple and stronger than his other works here.

Anterion Florimond is the everpresent autodidactic primitive. There is tremendous credibility in his plastic compositions of landscapes containing no people but plenty of white houses against the grey-green hills, outlined with dark green hedges. His beautifully compact "L'Autoroute" shows not a single car and his "Campagne de Riviere Sale" shows a beautiful little town on a hill. I loved the steeped white church around which the white houses gather like sheep. I wonder if Martinican greens are as austere limited as Floremont paints them.

Much Caribbean art evades the rainbow, ominously. I am beginning to believe that our Caribbean artists, except for Haiti's primitives, are fearful of tough painting problems such as the fulsome orchestra of color. Politicians may see a commentary on colonial status in this absence of color; I see laziness. No bayonets prevent our use of the rainbow. Earth colors are easier to harmonize while greens and blues can be treacherous, especially when acted upon by yellow lights. So we lazily choose earth colors. We are earthbound. We evade the sea. We evade the broad sweeps of space in most of our art. And when we use deep space we bedevil it with unbelievable surrealistic garlands of detail as if we were really afraid of emptiness and nothingness. Like St. Thomas, we seem to believe only in what we can touch day to day.

Rene Corail, who studied in both

Martinique and France, believes in using art as "A political arm in the interest of my country and the development of the Caribbean." He wants to re-educate his people, who were "deculturalized a long time ago...by colonization." It is interesting to see how he sets about the task, - does not attack it head-on.

His "Chevre Solitaire" is a freely sketched "Picasso" goat and his "La Pilule Oublie" is line sketch of a pensive woman. Both sketches are drawn on transparent acrylic sheets later mounted on thick wallboard panels. Dripped enamel paint produced the lively black drawing lines then many colors were blown, sprayed or allowed to run freely behind the black lines, dramatizing them. His "Cheval Fougeux" is another free result of textural and linear interplay direct on the wallboard panel. All three works are really vigorously sketchy and alive.

But we ask, where are Corail's politics?

I believe Corail is quite right in his assessment of our odd Caribbean politics.

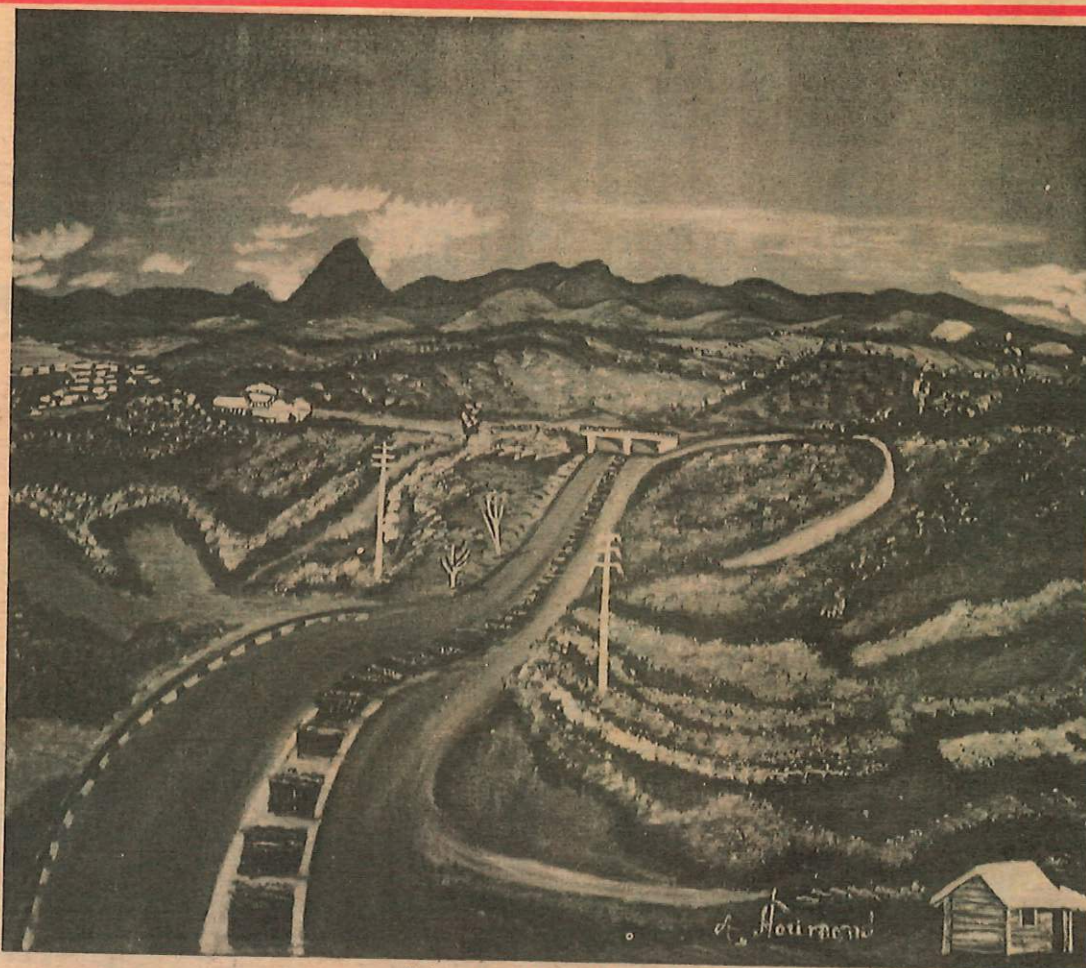
Victor Permal used similar plastic and political tactics in "Sortir du Brouillard" (Out of the Mists) a touchable grey-blue running colorfield painting. These two painters are pedagogical masters of the veiled message. Masters of metaphor, they could drive revolutionists crazy.

Stephane Herte, mostly an educator, shows three nicely drawn figures. "Totem" is semi-abstract and has a soft pebble-like texture with rich blacks over-played with rich thin lines dripped from above, perhaps too abundantly. His "Nu" is a handsome female figure but his "Profile" is academic art.

The best represented artist in this show, Louis Laouchez, is a product of the Beaux Arts and Arts Decoratifs schools in Paris and has exhibited throughout Africa, Europe and the U.S. He now is a member of what he calls the negro group of the Caribbean" and wants "to demonstrate the realities and possibilities of Antillean black minorities which could have a positive impact on the artistic and cultural life of the black world." It is a shame that there is a "black world" on this homogenized earth. The future will be colorless.

Laouchez is a painter. He has built two painterly worlds. One is in his batiked canvasses where he dares to use greens and blues unlike his peers, though the reds, ochres, blacks and whites dominate spatially. Lines weave in and out of the charming images of his large triptych which starts with ancestral cells and passes on to the archetypes and ends with a child's images.

Laouchez has three other batiked canvasses and eight very satisfactory orthodox paintings. Notice that the ti-



"L'Autoroute" by Antierion Florimond

tles are all affirmative. "Moi, un Noir" is like a departmentalized cell. In "Deculturation," the cells dissolve into semi-geometric pictograms and ideograms in "Africa" the ancestor has two faces in one head against semi-geometric compartments. "Renaissance" is an amply-spatial vision,

rhythmic though poor in color. "Muselage Politique" has no cells but partisan bands instead, with scripted details. "Genealogie" has a central cell which is developing into a spiral pathway along which we meet jewels and other cells. "Rejouissances" has a central cell acting as

an eye and mirror of simple peaceful things and of lovers at quiet rest.

We Caribbeans speak in metaphors, the way Laouchez does in his paintings.

The exhibit is scheduled to end today but may be extended for a few days.



Sculpture by Marcel Pelage



"Rejouissances" by Louis Laouchez



"Totem" by Stephane Herte