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Seven sculptors at City Hall

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Special to the STAR

San Juan's fairly new City Hall Gallery has been putting on shows continuously since it opened, including three good collective exhibits on photography, painting and, now, sculpture.

The photography show was lent by Antonio Molina and other collectors and included some island pioneers of the last century as well as today's artist. The Puerto Rican Painting exhibit had a sufficiently representative, if academic, group of artists. Now the Puerto Rico Sculpture show is surprisingly good with seven sculptors represented: Tomas Batista, Rafael Ferrer, Jose Buscaglia, Elvira Coya, Rolando Gutierrez, Jorge Padron and Raul Mendoza.

The city hall exhibits have so far suffered from our make-do syndrome in the presentation of art. We make do with whatever is available. For example, in the present sculpture exhibit there was little or no initial publicity therefore the show came to my attention late. It closes this coming Friday. Second, though the premises have begun to take on the proper aura the stands on which the sculptures rest are a conglomerate of shapes, colors, scale, style and heights. I had to sit on the floor to really see Elvira Coya's charming bust of her daughter "Millot."

The Coya bust is made of "reconstructed stone," she writes. I guess she means the sturdy artificial stone made from certain ingredients that can be applied as a paste and then carved. The bust is about 20 inches high, yet it stands here on a low base barely its height. The face happens to look down to make matters worse, so at first I could only see the top of the head; it looks as if Millot were sulking.

Actually the head is candid and pleasingly open and it has none of the imposed linear arcs which Elvira Coya generally uses to tie faces, figures and planes together. Reliefs on a planar slab done this way in the show include the two sets of three women's heads: "Trilogia" and "Fe, Esperanza y Caridad." The sharp arcs are made by segments of circles which meet at strategic points in "Fe, Esperanza y Caridad," and are angular in "Trilogia." Otherwise both reliefs follow the same pattern and expression. They are efficient exercises in style, no more.

The overall unifying linear arcs and dynamic symmetry construction diagonals favored by international religious art and by Catalan "exemplary" painting to tie mural sized planar compositions together works better for Coya's other relief, "Musica y fantasia." Bourdelle himself would approve the tactile surfaces though I wish some of

the areas were smoother to offset the prevalent rough ones. "Musica y fantasia" reminds us of the impressive and large sculpture relief murals by Coya in the Ponce cemetery. She seems to have settled in our southwest judging by her monuments in Ponce and San German but she still maintains an international outlook. We need such spirits in the Caribbean.

I prefer Elvira Coya's sculptures in the round. Unlike the reliefs they are not planarized into two-dimensional patterns. Her "Mujer pensando" has interesting and reasonably deep diagonal thrusts in three dimensional space not quite Baroque but also not seen much in our art, which seems to prefer shallow space. "Mujer pensando" is sketchy though, and the textures are so methodically applied that they are quite monotonous.

Much better textural contrasts are

in ebony and "Cacique Agueybana el bravo," modelled and cast in bronze.

The planes of Batista's heads are barely suggested; in Lopez del Campo's work they are much more defined. Elvira Coya stylizes them sharply with swinging linear contours (except in "Millot") and Jose Buscaglia makes them disappear into the rounded general shape except when they show muscular strain. Neither Lopez del Campo nor Lopez Dirube are present in this exhibit, I wonder why. Lopez Dirube will soon have a large sculpture show in Venezuela and a fine, thick book is being published in Spain about his works.

Jose Buscaglia has four works here. "Los titanes" shows a tensely striving melee of round-muscled and intent titans who may move the world but also cancel each other's efforts out in the critical confused mass of human

abstract sculpture in this show. It is Rafael Ferrer's "San Sebastian," a metal construction. The work belongs to the Institute of Culture and stands unbelievably on a base proper for Mid-Victorian sculpture shows. Actually the sculpture is abstracted from nature. There is a heart, a head and other human parts suggested, not represented, by odd metal pieces soldered together, and the arrows are suggested by metal rods. The result is an original and expressive object that needs no anatomy or perspective. The contrast of shiny smooth and heavily textured surfaces is satisfactory, the scale is reasonable, the play of volumes quite classical.

Rolando Gutierrez and Raul Mendoza both work for "Marmoraria el arte" in Arecibo and both seem to understand white Carrara marble well although their five marble figures here are a bit too smooth, something like cemetery monuments. I wish they had studied Coya's and Ferrer's sculptures here and Batista's alabaster "Gato," which is so complete in its unpolished alabaster.

Gutierrez also has a white cement study, "Crisalida," which respects the texture of the medium. It is a semigeometric figure using balls and circles in interplay. His "El Vuelo" flows except where the grains and knots of the ebony wood slow the spatial flight.

Somehow, "Odalisca," the marble relief by Gutierrez reminds me of Rousseau's smooth-skinned sirens because it is primitiveness within sophistications. His "San Salvador Gaviota" is too phallic for a pictogram of flight. A lot of the sculptures in this show try to fly. I hope such a striving catches on in art; we are too pragmatic and earth-bound here.

Raul Mendoza is showing three marbles, "Los Amantes" with its rhythmic chasteness, "Torso de mujer" and "Torso de niño." The bases are made of marble too, which adds to the variety of bases here.

Jorge Padron's "Lamento" is like a game with four planks and is a pictogram of a man, crying out. But he made the mistake of carving a "constructed" design out of a single piece of marble. Much better is his "Figura antillana," carved in wood, combining rectangular and semi-conical shapes. Here again the grain of the wood fights against the equilibrium which the design could have had in another medium or even in another more fortunate piece of wood.

All in all, this is a good show and I hope Mayor Padilla keeps on helping art, including the "encuentro" Sunday afternoons on Cristo St. Carlos (Suenos) Ortiz, Encuentro's mainstay, is in the states but the show may not need another spark plug particularly if all artists are made to feel welcome, regardless of their origins.

The number of galleries in town was thinning out and now once again is growing. The latest addition is La Galeria San Sebastian a sort of painting and sculpture extension of Galeria Coabey across the street on San Sebastian St. on Old San Juan. Galeria San Sebastian has just opened with a good "stable" of artists.

Galeria Guatibiri in Rio Piedras and Galeria Oller in Puerto Nuevo are both still open, kept alive by their founders Marimar Benitez and Ruben Malave. They have the sturdy stock of pioneers who could build countries. Artists Wilfredo Labiosa, Luis German Cajigas and Angel Botello also keep their shopplaces open in Old San Juan, and their galleries welcome works and one-man-shows by other artists.

The courtyard Gallery of La Fortaleza can now be considered a bona-fide art gallery. According to La Fortaleza cultural affairs head, artist Rafael Rivera Garcia, art visitors need no longer wait at the entrance gate until the next "La Fortaleza tour" takes them along. They are sent directly to the gallery where an attendant takes them on.

— F.B.

seen in her two upstanding figures here, "La espiga" which shows a spike of a girl holding a spike of a plant in her bent hand. Also pert is "Nina con flores." Both figures have small delicate heads and hands.

I am happy that I had a chance to see these Coya works. Her monumental projects seem to prevent the creation of single sculptures. Muralists have that problem too.

Tomas Batista's five works here are ones we wrote about some time ago. They reaffirm the initial impression of solidity, stoic calm; and abstracted faraway alertness which his "Monument to the Jibaro" conveys now in the Cayey mountains. There's his marvellously alert yet quiet "Gato" carved in alabaster, reminiscent of the Egyptian, his rhythmic and decorative "Pez sobre olas" and his economical, if staid, "Tortuga," both carved in Barranquitas fossil stone. More academically orthodox are his two large heads, "Majestad Negra" carved

striving. His "Francisco Oller" seems too anecdotal and effete in pose though it is marvelous in portrait expression.

Buscaglia's "San Juan Bautista" head is poetically soft and his "Ariel" is pyramidal composition winged. But real flight seems to be prevented in Buscaglia's ever restlessly striving sculptures by some kind of botanical linear root system which traps the figures in the earth. His current work will straighten out all such patriarchal Catalan art nouveau influences. All the sculptures here were done between '72 and '73, and were cast in bronze in Spain at the same time that he was making his titanic struggles to have his monumental "Las Americas" figures financed and cast. Soon Las Americas Park will be a reality. In Hato Rey and his winged yet entrapped figures will be freer in the open air against the trees. His monument will be better off than in the patio of the Ponce Museum and he will at last be at peace after 20 years.

There is a masterpiece of modern



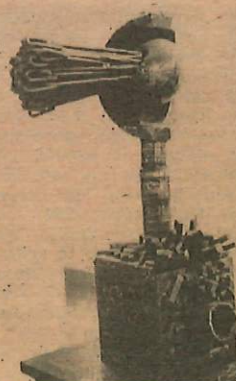
"Ariel" by Jose Buscaglia



"Crisálida" by Rolando Gutierrez



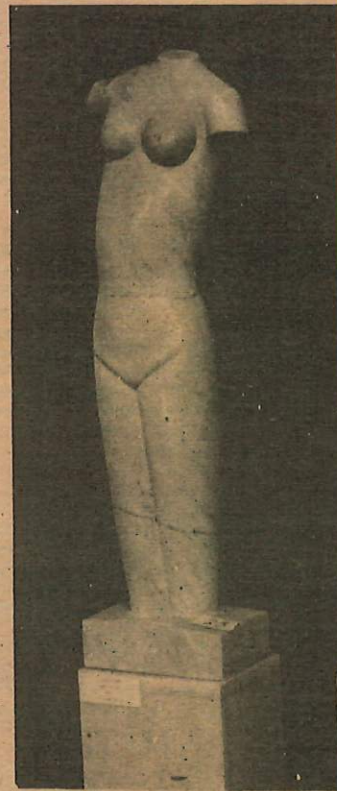
"Milloi" by Elvira Coya



"San Sebastian" by Rafael Ferrer



"Figura antillana" by Jorge Padron



"Torso de Mujer" by Raul Mendoza



"Gato" by Tomas Batista