

Jorge Soto S

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special To The STAR

Now and until Aug. 15 there is a shaman at the Museo del Grabado in Old San Juan. The 61 works on display by Jorge Soto Sanchez are original drawings on paper, not graphics for a welcome change in our graphic-laden milieu. A shaman is a priest who uses magic to discover the hidden in the same way Soto uses religious and erotic images in his work which hark back to Crete, to Asia Minor and the goddess Maa, and even to the Paleolithic cave drawings.

Get thee hence for a welcome change of pace. Soto is one of our best artists and he is now reaching his prime.

Soto is a Puerto Rican bred in the jungles of New York. I wonder if his work would be as charged with religion as it is if he had been born and bred on the island where no animal is poisonous and the sparse jungle is filled with mangoes and banana trees instead of steel. Food stamps and succulent foods do not breed either patriotism or religiosity judging by our cynical and pragmatic culture but steel and concrete canyons full of unknown people and situations can make a man cry out for God.

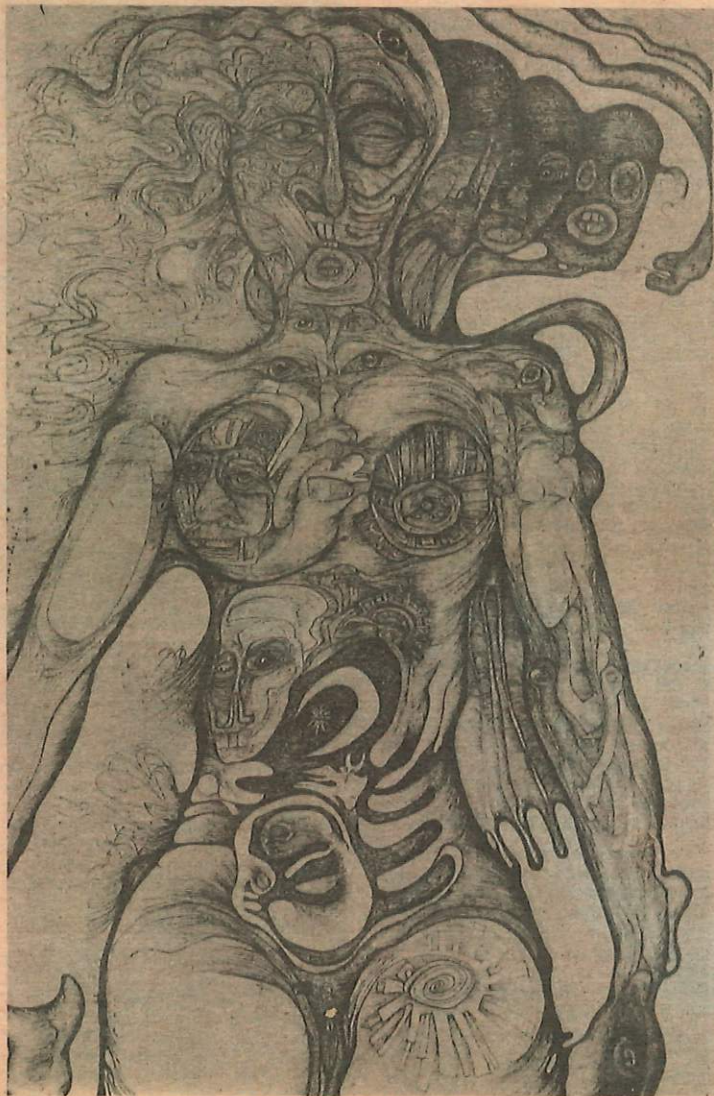
But Soto's images are not of any Waspy northern Gods. They have African and Taino red ochre stains on their flesh — even though all his drawings are done with black ink against cream-colored paper and not a touch of color shows.

Where do all the "santeria" signs imposed on Soto's Taino gods come from? The work shows well-digested African and Taino influences, there is a passing touch of Mayan art in the head of "Dios de la muerte" and (ill-digested) Japanese visions in the two "Japonesa en transformacion." Soto has ritually cannibalized Titian's Baroque art in "Les desnuda de Titian Transformada" and includes in it as well his visions of Caribbean ancestors. Those ancestors, by the way, show some influence by Wilfredo Lam but without Lam's botanical jungles. Soto's drawings stress the human figure, not the background spaces.

Soto, furthermore, eclectically and ritually cannibalizes Oller in his "El velorio de Oller en Nueva York" and Campeche in his "El Gobernador Ustariz en Nueva York." He has transported both of them to the Big Apple and almost transformed them by adding santeria signs and his own vision of human anatomy. The santeria signs in those works are not pure geometry because they are not neolithic enough, although they show their African ancestry even in their curved Baroque lines.

Soto, where do all these signs come from in your life?

"As a child," Soto says, "I used to freak-out every time I passed my grandmother's room, because of the santeria things she kept and the santeria rites she occasionally practiced. I used to freak-out because of fear but



"La mujer de universo" (detail)

now I understand them as a reflection of our ancestry, our culture, especially in the concrete jungle of New York. Even American negroes are catching up with the Santeria cults — they seem to see part of their roots in them. Thus Africa has come to New York via the Caribbean Cuba's influence can also be seen in such cultural interchange.

"We New York-Puerto Ricans always had 'botanicas' where herbs and religious images were sold. And now the Cubans furnish temples for the rites, propagating them more. When I use santeria signs in my work I simply reflect a part of New York Puerto Rican. I hope to fuse them better and better with my other signs as I go along experimenting as an artist and a human being. My so-called religious sense springs not out of any religious inclination but out of

my preoccupation with human well-being, a preoccupation for the essence of a life with dignity, the essence of our being."

I am glad to know Soto is aware of the need for a fusion of all elements into each art work as into the essence of being. Elements can't be added just for cultural, political or religious duty, they have to be esthetically fused into a oneness. In Soto's dutiful "Matrimonio de Atabeya y Chango" the couple remains apart, the Taino goddess appears rather fearsome and intense while Chango the African god appears rather contemplative. I wonder if they have gone to bed together. In "La Desnuda de Titian" the musician-voyeur is also shown stylistically apart from the Titianesque figure of the woman. She is a sensuous, big-hipped woman, he a Soto ancestor, a mixture of many

growths.

Big hipped women are the dominating presence in Soto's works. They are erotic but in the chaste Caribbean way; the breasts are small and the vulva, when shown, is usually a semi-abstract design as in "Prostitutas Re-visitadas." However, sometimes this design can be fearful. "El nacimiento de mi hijo; Jorge y yo como figura mitologica" is one-sided. The densely haired ex-wife is presented in full light and Soto is in dark tones, unbalanced. Much better balance is shown in the companion drawing "El Nacimiento de mi hijo: Jorge y yo como figura mitologica con testigos ancestrales." It is as if Soto feels more at ease when ancestors are around.

But the above cases are not the norm in Soto's work. Soto is usually drawn to the figure of woman not as the fearful cave but as the life-giving vessel. Almost all of his woman figures show an X-ray vision of a fetus within the womb and include many reassuring heads of ancestors jutting out from her image or as part of her anatomy. Thus Soto's big-hipped woman is goddess Maa all right, the symbol of mother earth, almost never the seducing enchantress.

Why do Soto's images of women as the universal mother have such small breasts? Often in black and Puerto Rican art it is a pattern when families split up.

Soto's father abandoned his mother when he was an infant and she soon married a mulatto a merchant marine who often was absent from home. As a child he wondered why his "father" was so dark when he was so light. It made him worry and doubt since nobody tried to explain the mystery. As he wrote in the catalog, "The ideas and themes of my works issue from my unhappy personal experiences, from my preoccupation with my culture... my roots, Taino or African, and from the end, also the beginning of human beings."

In the cases of broken families here and in the states, communication with the child is cut off many times. The absent father is often ill-remembered by the abandoned mother who often has to be absent from home and children because she has to work, hence the small breasts, or else she has to marry in haste hence the doubts on the children's part.

The case may be complicated by the preponderance of busy women in the child's life including teachers and social workers, by lack of communication with stepfathers and by the patronizing attitude of macho policemen.

Soto was lucky when he balanced himself on his cultural roots and his "ancestors." For example, his "La Esperanza" shows an emaciated couple but they are being held up hopefully by a totem. His "Primavera" is a more complete couple; they are alone and she is pregnant. On the other hand, his lonely "La Mujer del

anchez

Universe," already mentioned, is like an energetic vociferating and upstanding torso of a pregnant goddess Maa without precise hands but with four heads. Other ancestors cover her torso and breasts and a sunburst on her left leg is near her abstracted vulva. Sunbursts are supposed to be macho symbols.

In my article on "Campeche and Rafael Tufino" I touched lightly on such delicate matters. Both of them, like Soto, came out well. The three of them have given birth to very tender and quite intensely expressive images of woman. Soto, like Tufino, is versed in such psychic symbolism. Soto's "La creacion de la mujer-mito Taino" shows a large "carpintero" bird pecking creatively at the chaste image of woman.

"The bird is supposed to be a masculine symbol," Soto says, "so I made its beak as part of her parts. Such simple connections between women and birds can create a lot of myths. But I prefer to maintain an open mind, I don't want to force my theories onto reality."

It is important to stress that the eclectic influences on Soto's work are being transcended. He is by now his own man, as far as a man and an artist can be in this world. In his "Encuentro de Chango y Yemaya", Wilfredo Lam's influence is being transcended. The resultant arabesque of grey and light figures is not hidden in a jungle as in Lam's work but is set against a strong simple darkness. Similarly, the Maya head in "Dios de la muerte" is surrounded by the Soto bird and his long undulating lineal arabesques.

Soto's use of line as traveling energy is quite rhythmic and his shorter lines are varied both for modelling and for affirming details such as in his excellent "Autoretrato presente y futuro" in which deep set eyes in tight darkness are surrounded by lighted wisdom. The remnants of fetal lizards here are almost held tenderly by the artist's thumb and forefinger, as if they were trophies. Soto is decidedly beginning to be in command of his world and future here. He says he did this drawing in Mexico in 1975 after enjoying the vim and vigor of the great Mexicans and also where he felt his room was tremendously large compared to the furnished rooms he knew in New York.

Back in New York's crowded jungle, he did his other "Autoretrato: Quien soy?" in which he seems tired. Evidently New York's populated cubicles hang heavy on him. His "Pesadilla Interrumpida" shows a woman grabbing a love while semibotanical ancestors are witnesses.

A charming series of "Mitos Tainos" is solemnly contemplated by his seriously calm "Autoretrato III," and in "De las criaturas surgieron los seres" the bird is the dominant ancestor figure. All the other ancestors in other drawings seem to have



JORGE SOTO SANCHEZ trabajo sobre papel 1974 al 1978

"El velorio de Oller en Nueva York"

Soto's lips.

His series of "Homenajes" presents the known figures of artists Pedro Alcantara and Francis Bacon because they dare to create their own anatomy and make the human figure dominant in their work as Soto does. He presents "Don Carlos" because he

is Marx, "Don Campos" because he is Albizu, "Don Ramon" because he is Betances and the "Unknown Painter" is Rembrandt.

Several drawings called "Tito" present a loved friend who was killed by the New York police. Tito died mysteriously in prison after being

clubbed along with a group of Latinos including Soto. Thus do ancestral patterns reveal our reality and our art in Puerto Rico and New York.

Soto is one of our best shamen a real medium as an artist. You should see the show to learn something about being Puerto Rican.

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL

Carnegie Library Ponce de Leon Ave. Stop 1. Puerta de Tierra. 724-1046. Open Mon. to Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sat. 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Current show: works by Luis Calzadilla.

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."

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.

GALERIA BOTELLO

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

GALERIA COABEY

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

GALERIA DE BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE

102 De Diego, Santurce. 725-1135, Mon-Fri 9-9.

Sat & Sun 9-6 Sculpture and Graphics. Current show: Collective exhibit by Baj, R. Ferrer, D. Garcia, M. Irizarry, R. Unoner, R. Polesello, C. Oldenburg, A. Segui.

GALERIA DE PALMAS DEL MAR

Palmas del Mar, Humacao. Mon-Sat. 10-1 and 2-6; Sunday 2-6. 852-3450 Ext.2507. Works by Roberto Moya and others.

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900

Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce 725-2617 open 9-5 daily except Tuesday and Wednesday.

GALERIA LA CALETA

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

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.

GALERIA RAQUEL

San Jose 257, Old San Juan. Mon. to Sat. 10-6; European oil paintings.

MANOS

Convention Center, Condado. Contemporary ceramics by the Caparra Studio. Current show: Silver jewelry by Colombian Roberto Friedman.

GALERIA W. LABIOSA

415 Sol St. Old San Juan. 724-6293. Mon-Fri. 1:30-5:30, Sat. 9-5:30. Puerto Rican art.

GALLERY, DEPT. OF EDUCATION

Corner Cesar Gonzalez and Kalaff Sts., Urb. Las Monjitas. Mon. to Fri. 8-1 and 2-4. Current show: Paintings by Jose M. Sepulveda.

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 DE LA LORTALEZA: Governor's

Mansion, Old San Juan. Open only during business hours. Current show: Works by Jose R. Alicea.

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.

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.

UNIVERSIDAD CATOLICA Library, Ponce. Pre-Columbian sculpture from Antonio Molina exhibit.