

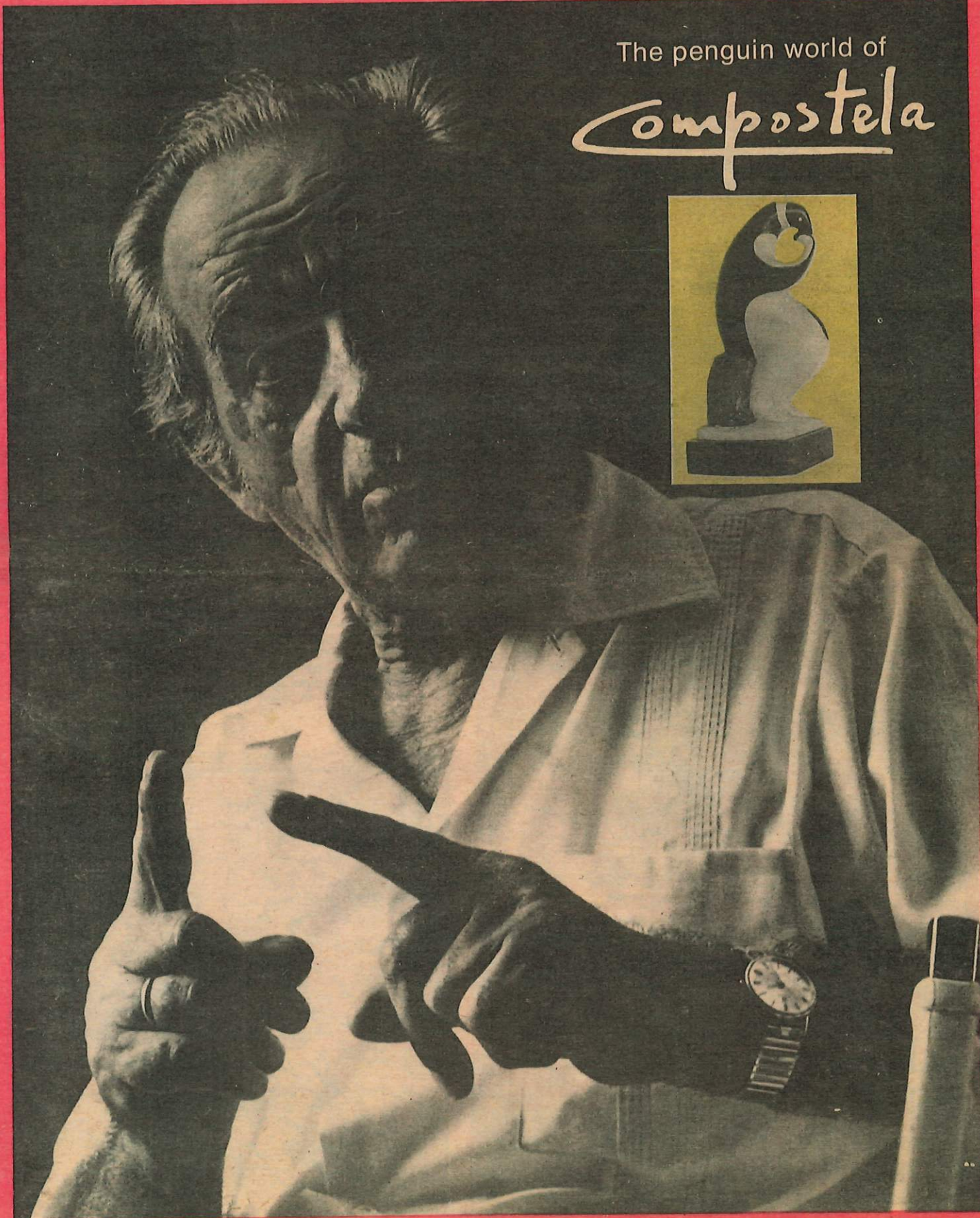
THE SAN JUAN STAR

# SUNDAY

SEPTEMBER 17, 1978

The penguin world of

## *Compostela*



# COMPOSTELA

By FELIX BÓNILLA NORAT  
Special to The STAR

This month the UPR is the art capital of Puerto Rico with two retrospective shows by two of our most prestigious artists, graphic artist Lorenzo Homar at the UPR General Library and Francisco Vazquez Diaz known in sculpture as Compostela, at the UPR Art Museum.

Furthermore in the museum's archaeological wing you can also see now the new presentation of our neo-Indian roots in the Caribbean as organized visually by Mela Pons de Alegria after three years of labor, little money, and a lot of headaches. It is not her fault that our Black roots are barely suggested, that our Hispanic roots are elliptically covered or that our 80-year deluge of Nordic influences is taboo. Someday all those influences will be presented together in one single museum, the better for us to fulfill our part in the Caribbean.

Mela Pons is a sculptor herself and a former Compostela student, so she was pleased to gather 90 of Compostela's work, about one fifth of his 38 years of production to celebrate his 80th birthday. Compostela's one-month show will close Oct. 7. Homar's one-month show closes Sept. 30. You should see both. Both artists are realistic of figuration and both try to move us through ideas and disciplined technical virtuosity.

Compostela is still actively at work, smokes three packs of cigarettes a day and has no signs of a

cough or purring cat in his lungs or veils of water in his eyes. Of such strong constitutions were the fire-breathing dragons of Eden made.

It used to be a mystery to me how a fire-breather like Compostela came to choose polar penguins for his subjects but now I know better. He is not really a fire-breather. He only seems so. It's camouflage. Actually he is too sentimental and honest for dragon-like midsdeeds. Furthermore, he managed to marry the most open-faced and honest woman I know, Margot Arce, who breathes flowers and sweetness even when she castigates the new-fangled dragons of colonialism and imperialism or the errors of rhetoric of our writers, her former students at UPR.

The marriage of two such honest people seems to pay off in good health and spirits. But in the case of Margot wisdom has been very helpful too. As she says "I know the moments when I am second place in his life. Sculpturing is a vital element for my husband."

Imagine Margot Arce as second best. What kind of a man is first and best even if only at times? What does he offer in return?

First of all, he reads "El Quijote" every night and that would be an endearing trait in any companion, even to someone who doesn't love literature as Margot does. To read "El Quijote" is to be forever young and to know that dragons exist to be slain again and again. Every dragon is a



"Correo Diplomatico" (Photo by Eddie Crespo)



"Los Exilados"



"Don Quijote" (Photo by Eddie Crespo)

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# Courage in the face of death

By MANUEL MARTINEZ MALDONADO,  
MD

Special to the STAR

I am always impressed by bravery. Not impulsive bravery which may be triggered by emotions other than heroism or altruism but rational, conscious evidence of chivalry and valor. Patriotism in particular moves me no matter how melodramatic it may be, even in movies. For example, Paul Henreid commanding the orchestra to play La Marseillaise in "Casablanca" in order to drown the ugly national chants of Conrad Veidt and his Nazis, always brought a lump in my throat. So did Paul Lukas' last speech in Lillian Hellman's "Watch on the Rhine."

Sometimes, I read in the newspaper of some heroic deed, such as the raid on Entebbe, and I feel proud to belong to the human race. News items are a bit distant, however, from day-to-day life.

There is, however, a form of personal bravery with which I am more familiar. I have seen it many times, yet it is unpredictable as to who will show it and, to be sure, I can't even ascertain that I will have it.

On many occasions, I have had to tell someone that the illness he or she harbored had the potential to be lethal. The person is told the alternative, explanations are given, sometimes haltingly. The person may wish to know and one's duty is inescapable. The reaction has been variable, but to my surprise there has been, more often than not, strength where I

though weakness would dwell, clarity where I thought darkness reigned. The reasons, of course, are not known to anyone but it seems that being alive and being told that you are to die can provide hope and fortitude.

The answer is not always religion for I have seen this form of courage in those who are not so inclined. Valor is a perceived quality and one cannot eliminate the possibility that what is construed as peacefulness is surrender. But valor is what I think is the common denominator among those who carry, and often defeat, fatal illnesses.

The illness that people fear the most is cancer. The visions of painful suffering, physical devastation and mental anguish seep into one's mind at the mere thought. It has replaced that other, once assuredly lethal illness, tuberculosis, as the destroyer of romance. Mimi in "La Boheme" and Violetta in "Traviata" were consumed by tuberculous coughs, but Jenny in "Love Story" was destroyed by leukemia.

Cancer, however, is not always fatal. Caught at the proper time, detected by the combined efforts of patient and doctor in undivorable cooperation, cancer may be licked. The two young people who reminded me of the subject of this column both suffer from an illness called Hodgkin's Disease. This disease, a form of cancer of the lymph glands, used to be quite hopeless but medical research and human perseverance have

helped to reduce its devastating effects. The two people, one a young man, the other a young woman, have survived for longer periods than most people with tuberculosis would have in the 19th Century. But what impresses me is the tranquility of these people's personalities. That they are valiant cannot be argued since for less, many a coward has ceased to function. In each smile, in each new plan for the future these people — and I am sure there are many others like them, seem to be saying, "Life must go on and such is my determination."

Both my friends have been exposed to surgery, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy all followed by illness and distress. Figuratively speaking, no scars are visible. Both are students and study is one of the few things that speaks of the future. Studying and, more importantly, learning provide futures. Conversation and smiles are brought about effortlessly and there is no darkness at their edges. To be brave requires character and help.

In my view the physician should play the central role of helper. Communication between the patient and the doctor should serve to clear up the misconceptions about the illness. I use "doctor" in a general way since there may be need for more than one in cases where the multiple aspects of a disease need to be understood. Confidence between the patient and the doctors is of necessity dependent on the effective

interchange of questions and information. Hope must sometimes be provided without painting silver linings where there are none. Small defeats have to be accepted sometimes if battles are to be won. These are the times when true friends and plain good folk are needed.

Many other diseases are just as bad if not worse than cancer. They may not be as frequent or cause as many deaths but the total effect can be just as shrill. Untreated chronic kidney failure can be as awesome as any disease known to man. Some people have to have their blood purified by a dialysis machine (artificial kidney). The treatment is not particularly painful but for a number of hours, usually 4 to 6 a day, three days a week, the patient is the unwilling companion of a robot. Needless to say, despair can not be a prominent feature of this situation if the patient is to survive.

Days when one is feeling sick, have an uncanny way of lengthening and postponing their departure. It is difficult to remain aloof when disease has struck, yet evidence exists that one must contribute with the desire of getting better. One must contribute by developing the hope that while one is alive some therapeutic breakthrough may become available. Even if inwardly one has difficulty feeling brave, the outward appearance of bravery helps as a reminder of the good qualities that characterize human beings.

## LETTERS

### COMPASSION, PLEASE

I enjoyed reading Dr. Manuel Martinez Maldonado's article, "Who is responsible for your health?" in Sunday, the San Juan STAR magazine of Sept. 3. However, I was surprised and disappointed when he wrote, "Why should anyone pay when a three-pack-a-day smoker has his lung cancer removed? As much as it was his liberty to smoke, which is certainly an individual choice, it could also be the choice of society not to include that person as a recipient of our well-earned dollars. Pity for the individual is not appropriate since smoking is not a condition imposed on him."

How can one equate an individual with society? It is the duty of society to care for all its members properly before the law, by providing them equal opportunities for economic and educational progress, religious freedom, as well as good health. In his long years of labor, that three-pack-a-day smoker with his cancer also has contributed to society in his own way, be it as a worker or as a pro-

fessional, and he too deserves our primary consideration.

As a second-year medical student, I look toward my teachers for guidance in assembling my medical identity. I always thought that along with the scientific data my professors presented, that they would instill in their students that sentiment of compassion — for both science and compassion must be parts of the composition of a physician.

Though Martinez Maldonado paraphrases Baruch Spinoza's thought that pity is a debasing sentiment, I'm sure he feels that the sympathy of one human being for another, and forgiveness, is divine...for, as Spinoza also wrote, "The more we understand individual things, the more we understand God."

STEPHANIE RIFKINSON  
Santurce

### SLICK BUT SLOPPY

It is my opinion that the STAR is a very good newspaper. But in my opinion, you need a nautical editor or at least an adviser on nautical matters.

Puerto Rico is an island and since many of your stories are going to concern the sea you would do well to bone up on a few facts about the sea and ships.

I was prompted to write this letter when I began to read the article "Five Years After An Oil Spill" which appears in Sunday, the Sept. 3 magazine in which Erin Hart starts off telling us that the ship that spilled the oil five years ago was located at "Latitude 17 degrees, 55 feet north, Longitude 67 degrees, 7 feet west." This location may be the true one by some incredible coincidence but even if it were Captain Michalapaolos wouldn't have known it since his methods of navigation surely were not accurate to the nearest foot. What I suspect happened is that someone, seeing the position written as 17 degree 55' N and 67 degree 7' W, took the apostrophe to mean feet, which it does in many cases, but not in navigation. In navigation it means minutes, the minute being one sixtieth of a degree. Lucky for the STAR that the position was not extended in accuracy to seconds — as in 17 degree

55' 28" N — or you might have been embarrassed by reporting the location of the 605 foot long Zoe Colocotroni to the nearest inch three miles south of La Parguera.

And I have also seen in the STAR on more than one occasion the term "knots per hour" to mean a velocity over water. A knot in itself is a unit of velocity and needs no specification of time. One knot is defined as one nautical mile — 6080 feet — as per hour. To say knots per hour is to indicate an acceleration. To give you an example, if a ship is really traveling at 10 knots per hour — as opposed to simply 10 knots — it is getting faster every minute it travels, and if the voyage is long enough it will break the sound barrier sometime in the middle of its third day at sea.

These are small details to be sure but when you are already doing the big things well it is only in small details that you can make improvements. And they do matter.

The story about the oil spill was very good.

JAMES R. POLIFKA  
Sabana Grande



new campaign for the morrow—a new sculpture, a new set of humanized poses for his "tableaux aux penguins" wherein some dragons of human traits or games are represented lovingly and ironically both. They are acted out by his humnized penguins, those ridiculously serious and formal birds who dress in black and white tuxedos always and always walk upright because they know they would look informal in the air.

It is this use of affectionate ridicule which differentiates Compostela's approach from Homar's. Both use irony and caricature to punish the dragons of society. But Homar is always in dead earnest, ready for the kill. He is a serious slayer for life while Compostela is a serious player for sport. Both are very much in earnest but Compostela does not hate or slay his subjects, he plays with them irreverently. Of course it is easier for Compostela not to hate since hateful qualities and people are automatically penguinized in his work, transmuted into his meta-language or micro-cosmos of penguins. Penguins are lovable; they are such foolishly pompous "pajaros bobos" as the Spaniard called them Homar on the other hand deals direct with the effigy of each enemy not a charming surrogate.

Furthermore, the dragons Compostela pursues are the universal foibles of mankind or at most, "types" of humanity and human conduct whereas Homar almost always deals with specimens. It is easier to hate individuals than types, especially if the types are penguinized. "In this

connection," Compostela says, "when people tell me that they recognize a certain individual in one of my works, I always tell them that I am of age and can be punished for it but that really I am not responsible if some people look like my penguins. People do, you know."

"I love it when people view my things and laugh and discuss the ideas I have penguinized for them," says Compostela, "I do not care if people do not notice the pure sculptural qualities my works may have. My interest is humanistic and joyful more than aesthetic. These sculptures are presented here to make students and grownups relax from their serious daily preoccupations." In this way, he used art for reasons beyond the pure arts; art for him is a medium for communication of ideas. Pure art comes second. The artist is a good companion to Margot because he cannot hate and because he can see himself with equanimity both as a man and as an artist. Hate brings acids to the stomach and lean and dangerous looks to the faces of people. Hate is the result of lack of wisdom and understanding or extreme egotism and the faces of Margot and Compostela proclaim them as wise, understanding and generous, even with enemies.

Furthermore, in his offhand way, irreverent Compostela reveres Margot. To the reader of "El Quijote" she is Dulcinea at home and the rest of the world can go pluit. "Without her I wouldn't have reached my present age," he says. But then, he im-

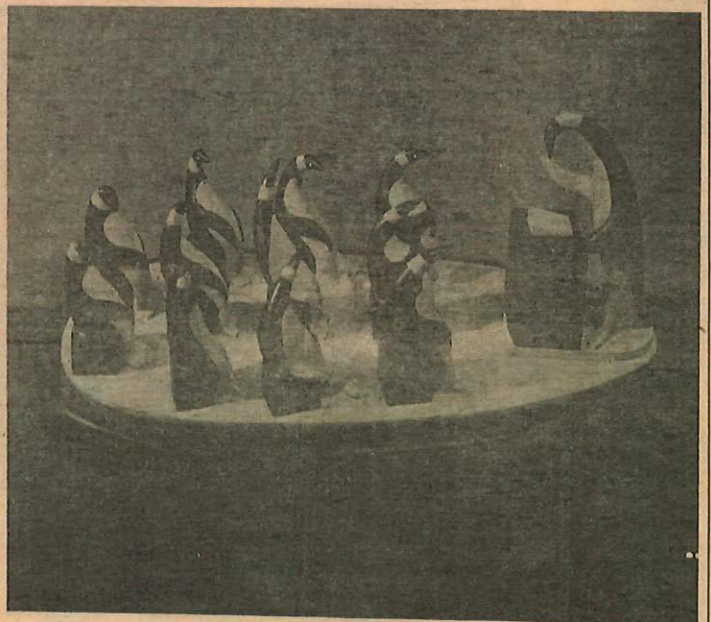
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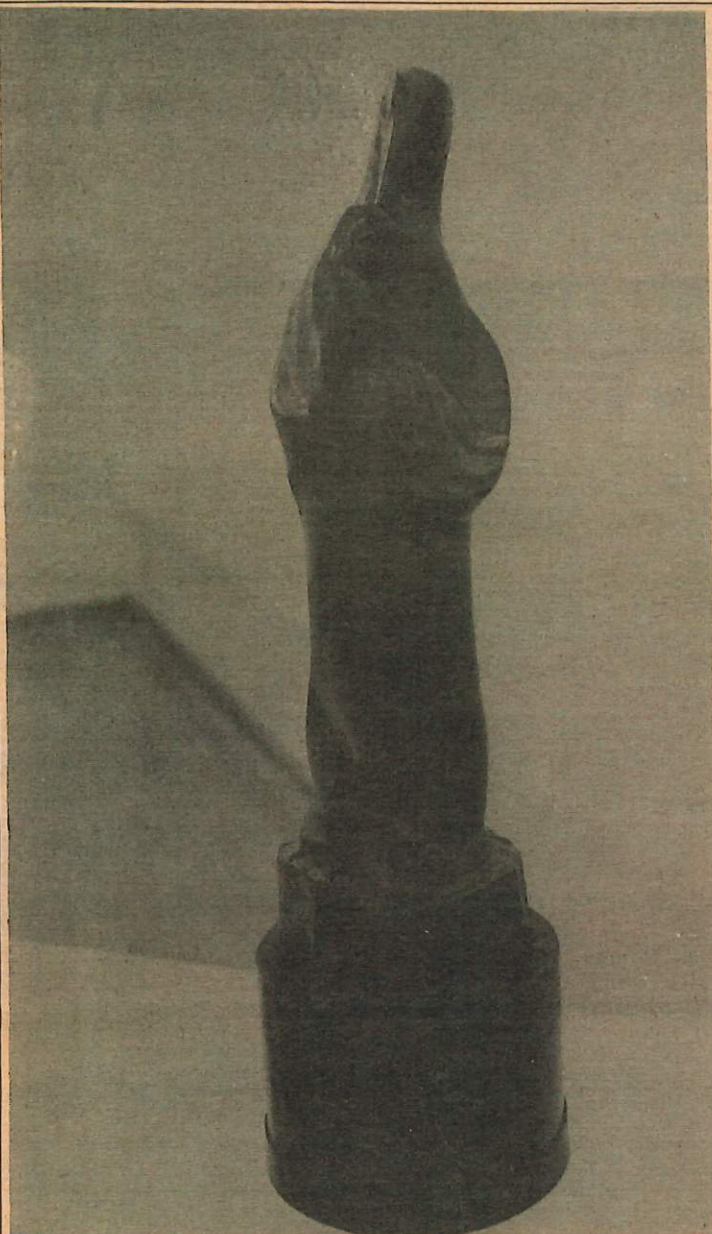
"Eva y la manzana"



"Violoncello," "Tenor y diva," "Violinista"



"Conferencia".



"Maternidad" (Photo by Eddie Crespo)

(Continued from Page 3)

mediately adds, as if to camouflage such an admission, "Of course, on Carmen Jovet's TV program I had to say that when I came to Puerto Rico there were a lot of spinsters at the UPR and Margot grabbed me. You can say I took her to the very furthest back seats at the movies and here we are. Let people enjoy such anecdotes. We humans need it."

He acts like an irrepressible child bent on a prank. No wonder he put false dates on some of his works including dates in the future or far past. This irreverence with facts to stress revered facts is his tactic for living and a technique for his work. His sculptured metaphors have the shock value of seeming contradictions.

"Actually, I am a troubador with my sculptures," he continues. "Look at this piece 'El Asalto.' A woman is being held up by a criminal. It happened at Stop 22 in Santurce. Since I could not write a 'plena' or ballad on the subject, I penguinized it .... because it could leave a scar on that woman's life. My piece here may leave different interpretations in people's minds. I try for one but am happy if the onlookers find as many as life itself."

"Now look at 'Los Exilados' here. I tried to suggest the rhythms of today, yesterday and maybe tomorrow and even always—the painful separations, the negations, the diasporas. Notice that those rhythms differ from the repetitive masses of 'Conferencia,' in which the listeners go to sleep at the dullness of it all."

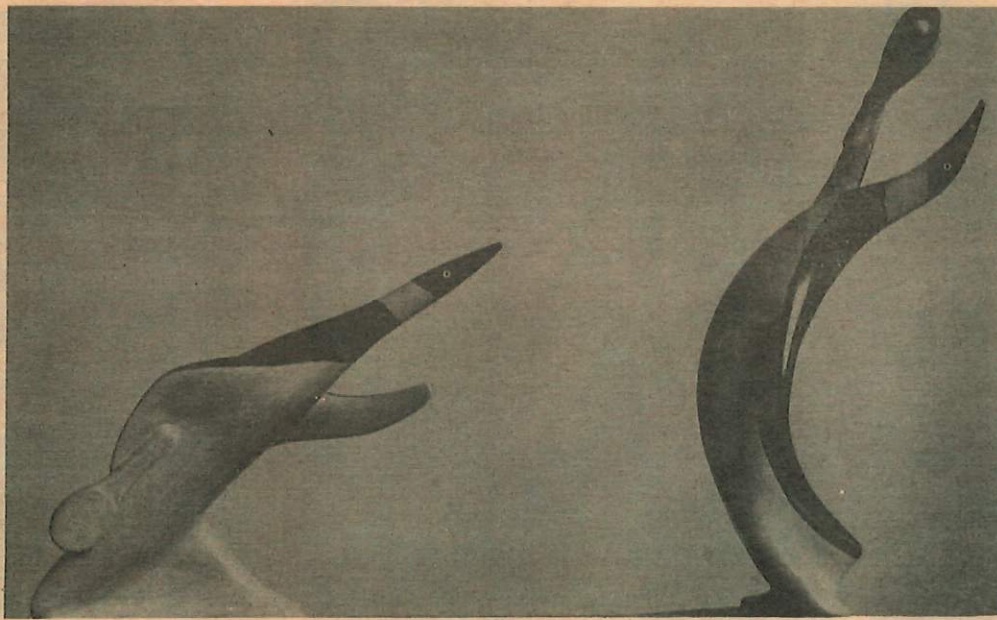
His descriptions of his work tell me that Compostela thinks like a professional sculptor. After all, he was the initial teacher of Batista and Lopez del Campo who speak of him with respect. But notice that Compostela himself always ends by emphasizing the humanistic idea behind the masses and rhythms of his work. Some might say he illustrates those ideas with his works. But that is exactly what he prefers in his life and work. He is the troubador or plena writer celebrating an anecdote, situation or event.

The only unpainted penguin sculpture in the show, in which purely sculptural volumes can be appreciated without the disrupting rhythms of the black painted backs and wings, is "Maternidad," a simple sturdily carved penguin mother with child which Margot his wife selected for herself and forbade him to paint. Maybe she was trying to tell him something, she has such a refined taste. I always have looked askance at painted sculpture except Santos. Marble and or wood are noble without paint. The Greeks were barbarians when they painted the magnificent Parthenon marbles with yellow ochre for women, red ochre for men and ultra-marine for backgrounds. Too many Spanish sculptors use black marble for faces, white marble for dresses or vice versa. It always seemed decadent to me.

But Compostela defends his use of color "First, I only use black, no other color, and I use it on the backs and wings of the penguins, exactly as black is localized on real penguins for camouflage in the water. I respect natural things. Second, notice that the



"Matrimonio"



"Jugando al tenis"

# Compostela

contrast between the lighter unpainted parts of each sculpture in its play with the black areas produces rhythms which sometimes add to the idea behind the sculpture. Third, I sculpt penguins only. Everybody can do the human figure, only I can humanize penguins. I mean, only I am penguinizing humanity, building a world of my own but as a mirror of the real world.

"Have faith in your work, sacrifice yourself for it, be devoted to your craftsmanship," is Compostela's advice to sculptors. Notice the emphasis on disciplined work. It is what he passed on to his various students in Puerto Rico. Compostela himself is anticlerical but as a gruff cover-up for his compliance with the old biblical qualities of faith and devotion. Work seems to be his religion.

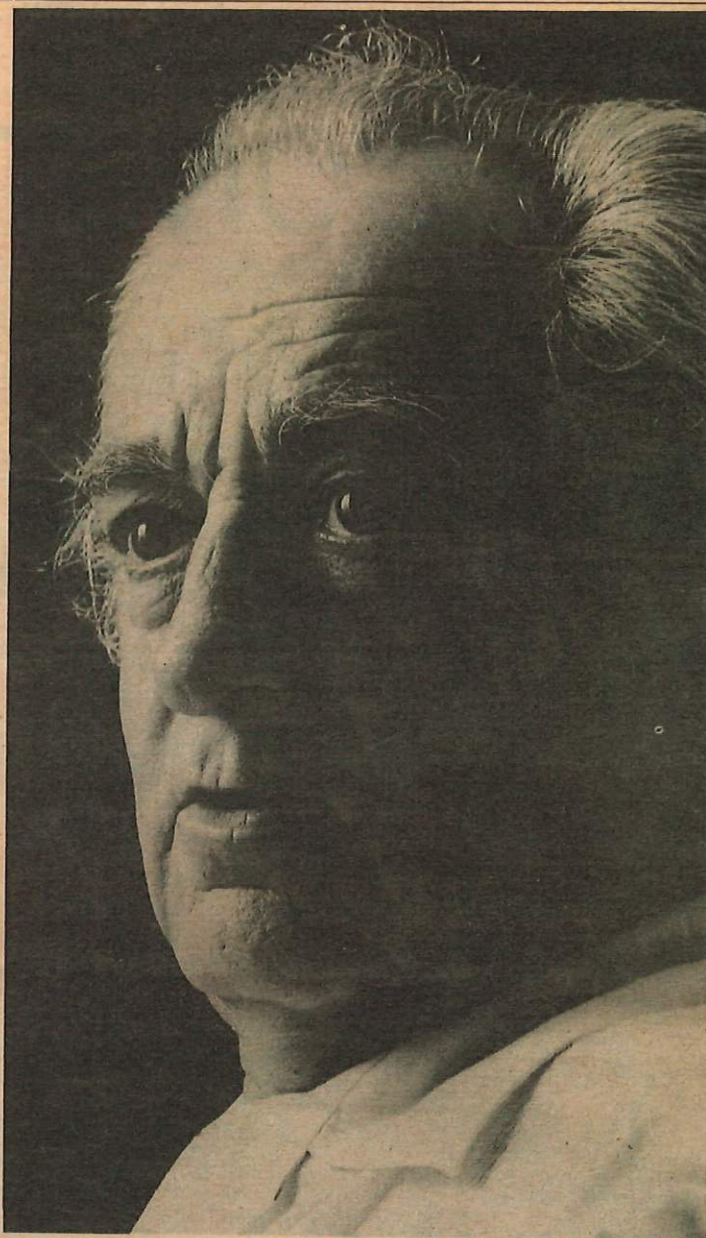
Compostela was born in Galicia in the north of Spain, a place where religious sculpture was also used for its social function as a medium for the education of the masses. Some of Spain's best humorists were born there, too. Compostela pushed on to Madrid but there he found two well known artists with his family names of Vazquez and Diaz, so he baptized himself "Compostela" in honor of Galicia's capital, a religious, art and university center. Compostela branded himself with his native land to answer a call from the far away recesses of the mind and the heart. He still answers that call after 38 years in Puerto Rico the reason he gives for his generalized subject matter and the ideas for his sculptures all of which were produced here. Some of them may suggest portraits or situations

typical of Puerto Rico, but he disclaims such intent. He doesn't want to prick the Puerto Rican ego. We are human enough as it is, so human we look like his penguins. "It's not my fault" he repeats, laughing with gusto.

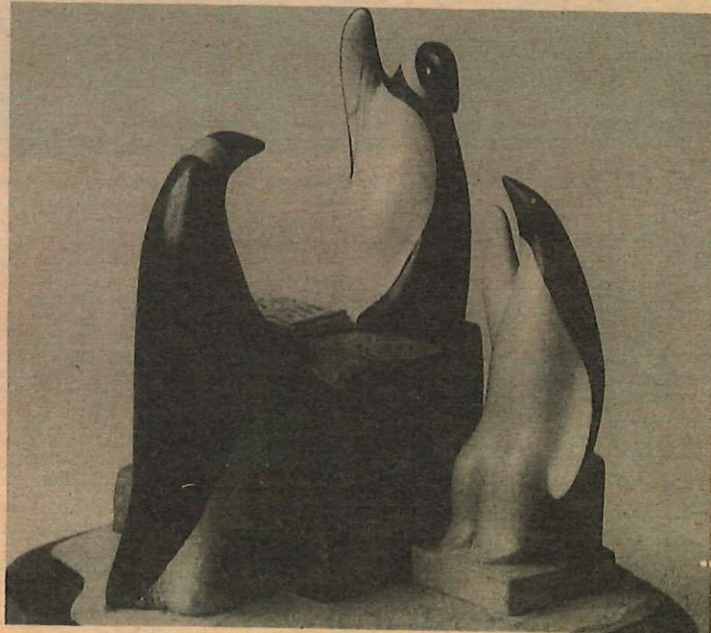
He has known pain. His sculpting forearm shows a long gash produced by airplane shrapnel. His otherwise smooth face is dented in three places where his orbital bone and upper jaw were crushed in an accident which made him lose his identity for months. He knew painful exile to concentration camps in France with half a million Spaniards after Franco won in Spain. He practically fled from France in the smelly unhealthy hold of a cargo ship to be admitted to Dominican Republic as a "farmer," of all occupations. He exhibited his work there and began to marvel at the richness, odor and density of tropical woods. When he came to the UPR to display his works and teach, he was very taciturn, a man of mystery.

How did he get into penguins? It happened in Paris where he was studying in the early thirties. He went to the zoological gardens and fell in love with penguins in general, until one day an Emperor penguin trod in, more majestic than the others.

That bird never knew the 500 descendants it has in Puerto Rico now. They are pushing Margot and Compostela out of their home as the creatures possess their creators. If you add the many of us who look like Compostela's penguins ... In any case, as you view his exhibit at UPR, have a good time. You may be looking at your other self.



Piedra con fósiles de Barranquitas" (Photo by Eddie Crespo)



"El Juramento"