

ART

DOBAL



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By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to The STAR

The dreams of ancestors do not always die, they sometimes linger to urge descendants to complete them. The question is: Should we let them?

This will from the past can be the result of genetics, family culture, geography or tradition. It may be explained through DNA, chemistry or the kind of blind urge that sends salmon swimming upstream. There is no need to bring any roaming souls in as explanation.

The most powerful programming may come from geography or family tradition. If an ancestor dies with an unfulfilled dream or if a countryside once bright is dimmed before historical completion, a descendant might pick up the pieces and live the dream to fruition.

This passing on of a light and a will has happened often in art in Puerto Rico. Some cases make me feel creepy. But now I will mention only the Villamils and the Dobals. Both examples took place in the 50s.

Tony Villamil had a brilliant beginning in art before he suddenly died. A few years later, his uncle, a lawyer, was suddenly compelled to paint "in Tony's memory," as he told me but then his painting lagged after he studied art seriously. Perhaps he felt unworthy of the dream. Then, in the 60s, Manolon Villamil, Tony's cousin blossomed as a painter. "I had to do it," he told me, "I don't know what caught me."

Although there are simple explanations for such things, such as talent, as exemplified by the musical Figueroa family, it is also strange the way these things happen. Something "caught" Jose Dobal as it had caught Manolon Villamil: Dobal died just three years later. What was his dream about? Who did he catch it from?

A retrospective exhibit of 27 paintings out of about 400 Dobal

produced, 8 of about 30 known sculptures, 26 drawings including caricatures and some wood reliefs, pastels and water colors are now at Casa Blanca in Old San Juan. Go see the show to know what art can look like when the artist burns from both ends like a candle in an almost religious act of sublimation.

Jose Dobal suddenly started coming home after eight hours of scientific work to paint until 3 in the morning. He had never studied painting, had no interest in it and couldn't stand the idea of drawing from life for hours on end as his brother Narciso had done since the early 30s. His wife called a psychiatrist friend to ask, "Is Jose going crazy? What drives him on? Should he see you?"

"No," the psychiatrist told her, "he is exteriorizing. Let him. Simply see that he sleeps well after every stint, and that he eats regularly. He is a great exteriorizer, don't worry." I remember Jose laughing about it.

Jose Dobal was then 37, now a citizen's average midpoint of life in Puerto Rico. Then it was about 5 years less. At the beginning of this century when another Dobal, his uncle, was painting, the midpoint was about 17 years less.

Our lifespan is now higher in Puerto Rico because of the unselfish work of people like Jose Dobal. He was head of the medical lab of the penitentiary, where, besides his regular "social scientific" work as he called it, he did personal research on bilharzia. He also worked in several other laboratories, for free, in San Juan, Guaynabo and the School of Tropical Medicine. In all of them he was pinpointing bilharzia within parasitology in general. "I am out to get those bugs," he told me once. "They maim people. I can't abandon the work even now for art."

He also wrote articles on parasitology and bilharzia for School of Tropical Medicine publications in collaboration with a Dr. Oliver of the

Medical School. Writing came logically from his scientific research. But what made him paint?

"I have to finish Ciso's career for him," Jose told me, laughing. (Laughing can be serious but I didn't know it then.) Narciso, his brother, was the professional artist in the family. He had studied with Sanchez Felipe in the early 30s and was studying in Spain on an El Mundo scholarship when I met him at the San Fernando Academy. It was the year before the Civil War, a war that ended the art studies of such others as Fran Cervoni, Jose R. Julia, Luisina Ordonez and Julio Marrero. But in that year before we Puerto Rican artists made an impression.

Narciso Dobal was always in good humor, drawing his "cartoons" all over the place while complaining about the teachers of the school who took themselves so seriously. About five years later he won an international first prize from the Container Corporation of America for a powerful painting which had its beginnings in those Madrid "cartoons." His teachers had not liked them. They are caricatures, he was told. That painting was reproduced in the company's advertisements all over the world, more times than any other Puerto Rican painting I know of, including Oller's "Velorio."

Ciso had established a blood bank in the Santurce Professional Building by the time I came back to Puerto Rico in 1949. He was painting very little and once told me, "Blood is really something, you should see it under the microscope." And so Ciso opted for science. Or was he on a kind of strike? A few years later he did produce a fine mural for Henry Klumb's Bayview Chapel in Catano.

"There was this uncle in the family early in the century who painted. I wish I knew more about him to damn him or not," Ciso had said in 1949.

Was Ciso on strike then because he felt unworthy of a dream from the

past? How much of the past should rule art or anything else?

Whatever grabbed Jose Dobal did not let go until the end. He produced at a faster pace every year. You could see it at the exhibits he put on in '55, '56 and '57. He died just before his '58 show having produced about 400 works that year, more than one per day. The quality may have sometimes suffered but many times it gained in liberty, assertiveness, economy and emotion. You can sense it in the present show. Notice the charcoal drawing, "Silvestre," and "Veigantes," both of 1957, wherein the volumes are loosely contoured and the colors bright, then his '56 "Las Banistas" wherein the volumes are flattened by the strong and rhythmic linear contours and the colors have been greyed. Compare both to "Crucifixion" of 1954 which is a curiously colorful and eclectic exercise between Van Gogh expressionism and Romanesque mosaics.

It is logical that he felt free to try and copy many styles and fashions in art absorbed through books. He did such exercises to loosen his brush and start "his own lines." He never did decide his final style. Yet at every stage his work was distinctively his own because of its freedom and emotion. Every time Andres Bueso or another friend would suggest, "Why don't you finish this bit?", Jose would firmly answer, "It's enough as it is," and most of the time he was right. Most pictures are killed by pretentious overwork. Jose gained from being in a hurry.

Actually Jose started art through sculpturing with dental plaster as a hobby in early 1954, adding odd bits of stone, plaster of paris and even clay to economize on the expensive dental plaster. Clay can be fatal in such mixtures but he was careful in proportioning and his works show little deterioration. Notice the anatomical interest in the very small "Panther" of 1954 with its curious dragon-like head. His later "Suplica," two figures in a kind of ecstatic

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: Mobil art salon.

CASA DEL LIBRO

255 Calle del Cristo 724-0354. Open Mon. to Fri., 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 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. Current show: Watercolors by Ruben Rios.

GALERIA COABEY

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

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 Puerto Rican artists.

GALERIA ELUSTONDO

Cristo 200, Old San Juan. M-S 9-6. Paintings, drawings and woodcuts by owner.

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900

Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce 725-2617 open 9-5 daily except Tuesday and Wednesday. Current show: "Fragmentos de mis islas," photographs by Jose Ruben Gaztambide.

GALERIA GUATIBIRI

1003 Gonzalez Ave., Rio Piedras. Current show: Works by Rios, De Romero and Gaztambide.

GALERIA LA CALETA

70 Caleta de San Juan. Old San Juan. 723-8627. M-Thurs. 10-6; Fri 10-3, sat closed Sun. 1-6. 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

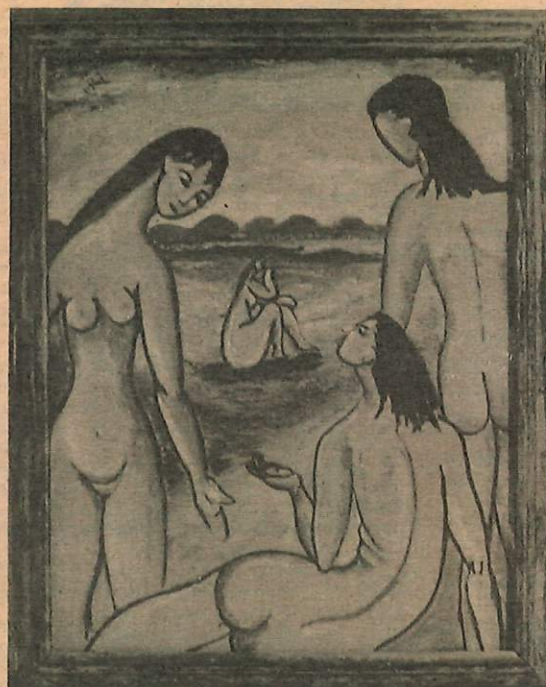
City Hall, Old San Juan. Current show: Collective show by Puerto Rican artists.



"Crucifixion"



"Suplica"



"Las Banistas"



"Nude Torso"

relationship, continues this anatomical emphasis but with more verisimilitude and volumetric rightness. His masterpiece is one of the latest 1957 works, the "Nude Torso" belonging to Ponce Museum. Sometimes I have thought his sculptures better than his

pictures, but he didn't produce enough of them to really decide. Some of his best paintings have gone out of Puerto Rico with about 90 sold, whereas his best sculpture is right here now.

From 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. Jose

Painted during those years, surrounded by classical music. He was back in his laboratory by 8 a.m. Did he keep the music on when he did his scientific work? I'd like to know if he needed such insulation then.

Was Jose's fire Narciso's or his own?

Was their fire willed by their uncle?

The art works do not care. They are here to enjoy now and belong to the future.

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.

GALERIA SAN SEBASTIAN

104 San Sebastian St. Puerto Rican paintings and sculpture.

MANOS

Convention Center, Condado. Contemporary ceramics by the Caparra Studio. T-F 12-3; S&S 12-4.

GALERIA W. LABIOSA

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

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 FORTALEZA

Governor's Mansion, Old San Juan. Open only during business hours. Current show: Sculpture and drawings by Tomas Batista.

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. Current show: posters and drawings by Jose Melendez Contreras.

UPR LIBRARY

Retrospective show of works by Lorenzo Homar.

UPR MUSEUM

Rio Piedras Campus. Open daily 9-9, Sat., Sun. 9-3. Current show: penguins and fossil-rock sculpture by Compostella.

UPR MAYAGUEZ MUSEUM.

Student Center. Current show: paintings & sculpture by Bill Birdsall.