

Puerto Rican Art Moves Outward, Añd More Inward



Laura T. Magruder for The New York Times

A lineup of young Puerto Rican artists: front row, from left, Teo Freytes, Charles Juhasz-Alvarado, Yrsa Dávila; rear, from left, Rosa Irigoyen, Ana Rosa Rivera Marrero and María de Mater O'Neill.

By LUISITA LOPEZ TORREGROSA

SAN JUAN, P.R.

NO one calls it a revolution, but in the last decade, especially in the last few years, young Puerto Rican artists - men and women in their 40's, 30's and younger - have been pulling away from the island's insularity and traditional art forms and reaching out. They've mounted experimental installations and other provocative works in galleries and alternative spaces in parks and streets. The boundaries, they say, are being torn down.

It's "a very special hour," says the San Juan artist Charles Juhasz-Alvarado, a 35-year-old Yale graduate whose large structures, are receiving attention in Madrid, Barcelona and New York.

Michelle Marxuach, a San Juan art promoter, concurs. "A lot of things are beginning to happen," she says. "There are more spaces. You can see more. There are no more closed channels."

If anyone should know, it is Ms. Marxuach. She is one of a handful of major engines driving Puerto Rican art, marketing it overseas and finding young talent. After 10 years of struggle, she says, she is enjoying some recent successes, notably an international project she organized, called Puerto Rico '00, which turned San Juan's patios and galleries into a stage for performance and conceptual art last October.

What's happening here - at a time when, not coincidentally, Caribbean art has come into vogue - has not gone unnoticed in New York. "There is a renewed energy, new possibilities," says Deborah Cullen, 35, a curator at El Museo del Barrio in Manhattan, who was visiting here. "This generation is more optimistic about showing their work outside. They have a lot of contact with Europe and the United States, and there's more effort now in Puerto Rico to bring in artists from outside." Ms. Cullen, who is married to the 33-year-old artist Arnaldo Morales, has organized a show of installations by six San Juan artists (her husband is not among them), which opened at the museum last month.

Looking back at Puerto Rican art of the

A new generation of artists explores matters of personal and political identity as well as their place in the world.

last 30 years, Ms. Cullen mentions the post-modern pioneers Antonio Martorell and Pepon Osorio, but goes on to say: "Today's younger group is very conversant with post-modern artists all over the world. They deal with Caribbean topics with more complex themes, breaking boundaries, exploring sexual identity and liberation from geopolitical borders."

To the tall, genteel Haitian-born Maud Duquella, who with Ms. Marxuach is one of the stronger voices in the arts in Puerto Rico: the roots of the flowering art scene here are, in part, economic. "People travel more, and with the prosperous economy more people are buying art," she says, "so that some artists - not all, but some - are able to live off their work."

As the co-owner of Galeria Botello, the premier gallery in Puerto Rico, and the manager of scores of artists from the long-established to the new, Ms. Duquella has considerable influence and can at times turn an unknown into a demi-celebrity. That is what happened to Arnaldo Roche, María de Mater O'Neill and Mr. Morales. "They're the best of their generations," Ms. Duquella says.

As she was speaking one morning in the sitting room at Galeria Botello, Mr. Roche came in. He's a kinetic 45-year-old with an 18-year-old's face and a genial manner far different from the darkness of his paintings - autobiographical works laced with self-doubt, questions of sexual identity and an inspiring dissection of his family. "We are in the best era of the arts here," he says,

Luisita Lopez Torregrosa, an assistant national editor of The New York Times, is writing a memoir about Puerto Rico.



"Strike a Pose" (1988), by Ana Rosa Rivera Marrero.

bounding into a leather chair. "More styles. More artists of quality. We're being recognized."

Pointing at a large canvas in his latest exhibit at the gallery, he describes his technique: he takes a bicycle tire, scratches the surface and makes an imprint of the figure underneath. "I want to touch first, to feel the object, the body," he says. He speaks with big gestures, his hands reaching out and grabbing the coffee table in front of him for emphasis. His paintings have been exhibited in the Americas and in Europe, and his success is such that he can afford to hire assistants in his workshop. A manic worker, he says he rarely socializes but keeps up with all his friends in the art world. He mentions Mr. Juhasz ("brilliant") and Ms. O'Neill ("in transition") but keeps the focus on himself, on his work.

As in every art world, there are circles within circles here, large and small planets orbiting one another, and in no time one finds the rivalries and connections. In such a tiny sphere, Ms. O'Neill says, there are "not six degrees, but zero degrees, of separation."

Everyone knows everyone. Mr. Juhasz is married to the artist Ana Rosa Rivera Marrero, both of whom have exhibits at the Museo del Barrio. The Cuban-born Rosa Irigoyen, a close friend of Ms. O'Neill's, is Ms. Duquella's latest discovery. The artist Teo Freytes and his wife, Yrsa Dávila, live in a crowded loft above Mr. Juhasz's, in Old San Juan. Most days, they can be found drinking El Presidente beer, in clouds of smoke, around the Freytes-Dávila dining table or in Mr. Juhasz's loft, where his work and that of others takes up much of the space.

It isn't that much different from the days in the late 1980's, when Mr. Freytes, a digital artist, and Ms. Dávila, a promoter and manager, ran one of the first alternative spaces in San Juan, where anyone could perform, recite, paint, play music. It was a crazy place with no rules, no restrictions, no fees. It lasted five years. Good work came out of it and much that was bad, but many installation artists and experimental painters found solace there (and held parties there), and though 10 years have passed since they closed their gallery, Mr. Freytes and Ms. Dávila still figure in Puerto Rico's art scene.

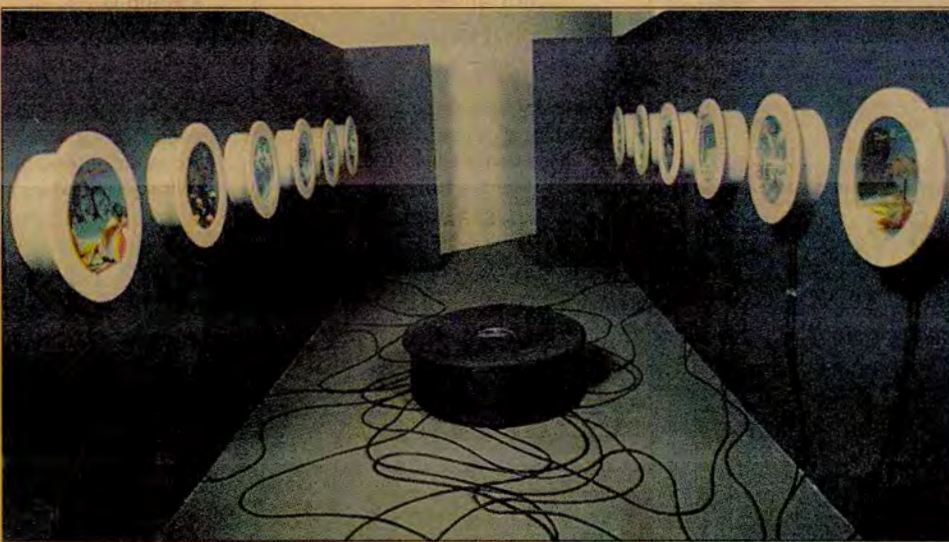
But no one is at the center of anything, Ms. O'Neill says sharply, as is her way, walking in old sandals in her 1910 house, her cats curling around her legs, her hair falling on her face. It is a weekday afternoon and she has been touching up a window sill on the porch. Her latest painting hangs barely dry on a wall in her workshop (in another house it would be the dining room), a strand of cat hair still stuck to the canvas. She has been working with thick, heavy, luminescent oils, which she imports from Europe, and the subject of this painting - rooms of her house, cats and all - is almost irrelevant to what she has been trying to do, she says, and that is to create new textures and colors and light.

The painting, which she finished in December, had already been sold to a collector who had never seen it. Few artists can sell a painting sight unseen, but she can, such is the place she occupies in this small world - the center, sometimes quietly, sometimes



Photographs courtesy of Galeria Botello

María de Mater O'Neill's "Classify This," from the set of lithographs "End of Game" (1999); left, Rosa Irigoyen's installation "Intimate Interference" (1999), composed of light boxes, digital images, sound, water, wood, fabric and cables; below, "The Eye," a digital work by Teo Freytes (2000).



not so quietly, and she has been there for about 10 years, since she was 30.

The list of her achievements is long. A graduate of Cooper Union in New York, winner of the grand prize at the international biennial in Ecuador, the only Puerto Rican included in a traveling exposition of Latin American women artists, she has shown her work in Majorca, Barcelona, Buenos Aires and several cities in the United States, where she has been an artist in residence at Rutgers University. Her paintings, which range from surreal self-portraits to explorations of Puerto Rican identity, hang in in-

seums and galleries in San Juan and abroad, and now she has been invited to speak in Italy in May. Traveling is not something she does happily, and after having lived in New York City for 10 years she rarely goes back.

Mari Mater, as everyone calls her, is no shrinking violet, and last year she caused something of a sensation with "Fin de Juego" ("End of the Game"), a set of lithographs and oils in comic-strip style that depict San Juan as a metropolis in chaos, futuristic, sterile. "It seemed to me," she says, "that painters in Puerto Rico were still working with an old social vision of an

agrarian Puerto Rico, a vision that was no longer pertinent in our times." She made her protagonist a woman - not any woman, but a lesbian - and the works sold out.

That was quite a diva's re-entry after several years' absence from the scene, years when she stopped painting, partly out of mourning. "Before I was 30 I was very innocent," she says. "After 30, I wasn't so innocent. People started to die. I lost friends in New York to AIDS. My mother died. I think that now I'm recuperating, and I feel more comfortable, and now I paint whatever I want."

While not painting, she wasn't idle. She founded a cyber-arts magazine, Cuarto de Quenepón, a quarterly journal that uses the Internet to disseminate information about Puerto Rico's art scene and publishes the work of local and international filmmakers, performers, artists and writers. With Quenepón, which she designs and edits in the back room of her house, she has, she says, distanced herself from her own stardom and the commercial art world. But in fact it seems that Quenepón has helped establish her further, as something of a nucleus, a voice in the arts beyond painting.

"Mari Mater is not only a tremendous artist," says Dr. Carmen Ruiz Fiedler, the director of the new \$55 million Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, "but she is helping others through Quenepón. She's perhaps the one who has most helped young artists think globally."

She is not so kind to herself. "I am a question mark in the art world," Ms. O'Neill says. "I am always a promise I've not fulfilled with myself. I am the controversial, the problematic."

Biting her nails, chewing her lip, she talks about numerous preoccupations, and few are as compelling to her as the question of Puerto Rican identity, a question that nearly every artist here confronts. "I am very ambitious," she says, "but I believe I have to contribute to the community of Puerto Rico. I have to paint here, and I have to work here. People who want to understand my work have to know Puerto Rico, have to know of its historic moments, have to understand my reality."

It is a reality that the young artists of Puerto Rico are struggling with and transcending with work that is no longer just homegrown but Caribbean, Latin American, worldly.