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Nelson Rivera. *Visual Artists and the Puerto Rican Performing Arts, 1950-1990: The Works of Jack and Irene Delano, Antonio Martorell, Jaime Suarez, and Oscar Mestey-Villamil.* New York: Peter Lang, 1997. xvii + 232 pp. $47.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-2620-4.

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Visual Artists and the Puerto Rican Performing Arts, 1950-1990, a well-researched and well-presented book, is a welcome contribution to studies of Puerto Rican culture. It focuses on the work of five contemporary visual artists who have contributed to the island's performing arts from 1950 to 1990, within the context of the dynamic sociopolitical changes that were occurring on the island during those years. The author selected Jack and Irene Delano, Antonio Martorell, Jaime Suarez, and Oscar Mestey-Villamil because their work is closely interwoven with the history of Puerto Rican performing arts. A diversity of primary sources, including scripts, scores, sketches, models, working drawings, photographs, videos, correspondence, radio and television programs, and newspaper clippings from the personal collections of the five artists and from the companies with which they worked, as well as pertinent secondary sources form the backbone of the research. *Visual Artists* has a twenty-one-page bibliography and forty illustrations.

What is remarkable about these artists is their artistic versatility and independence. They participated as librettists, composers, and designers, and some even acted in or directed the productions with which they were working. However, these artists, the author maintains, do not constitute a group or a movement. In the main, their work has been independent from one another, and their relation to Puerto Rican performing arts varies considerably. It is this versatility and independence that makes them unique and thus worthy of being singled out in a serious study.

Visual Artists consists of six chapters. In the first the author gives a brief but excellent analysis of the relationship between the socioeconomic history of Puerto Rico and contemporary Puerto Rican art and performance. The lives and works of each of the artists is discussed individually in Chapters II through V, with the exception of Jack and Irene Delano, who are treated together. An integral part of these discussions is detailed descriptions of a number of productions, including who was involved, how the productions were mounted, and often act-by-act descriptions. The illuminating closing chapter examines why Puerto Rican is art often excluded from the multicultural/global 1990s scene.

Introduction

One of the most valuable aspects of this work is the historical context Rivera provides from which to examine the contributions of these five outstanding individuals, because, as he puts it, "so connected are the arts and history in the island" that it is impossible to understand them in isolation (p. 2). The four-decade period covered by the book is a complex one, during which Puerto Rican society has undergone extreme changes. American citizens since 1917, it was only in 1948 that the U.S. government finally gave Puerto Ricans the right to elect their own governor. The Commonwealth Constitution of 1952, which cannot be amended without the consent of the U.S. Congress, gives only a semblance of freedom for Puerto Ricans. They are required to serve in the armed forces, yet they cannot vote for either the president or representatives to the House or Senate–their concerns are voiced by a delegate-at-large. Puerto Rico's commerce, postal system, currency, emigration–indeed, most of the island's infrastructure–are all controlled by the U.S. government. This status of Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State) remained unchallenged until 1989 when Congress began to define the conditions under which Puerto Rico might exercise the choice among independence, statehood, or status quo. And it was not until March 1998 that the U.S. Congress voted to allow the Puerto Ricans to hold a plebiscite to determine the future status of the island.

The first governor elected by the Puerto Rican people was Luis Munoz Marin of the Popular Democratic Party. Under his leadership Puerto Rico began an industrialization program which radically transformed the country's

socioeconomic structure. For the first time in the history of the island, agriculture was no longer the main source of income. Industrialization meant that more workers were able to purchase their own homes, and a strong middle class, virtually nonexistent before 1950, was created. The strength of the middle class impeded political polarization and made radical political action virtually impossible.

The colonial status of Puerto Rico has been constantly challenged by a wide variety of *independentistas*, as pro-independence partisans are known. Their activities have ranged from voting pro-independence in elections to refusing to participate in an "imperialist regime" to acts of violence which have included an attempt on the life of president Harry Truman, an armed attack on the U.S. House of Representatives, and a Wells Fargo robbery in Hartford, Connecticut, that netted members of Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (FALN, Armed Forces of National Liberation) seven million dollars. Government response to the *independentistas* has ranged from surveillance by island authorities and FBI, harassment, and jailing to ambush and murder by the police.

The nexus between the political scene and performing art is the critical theme of this work. The author says that

Most Puerto Rican artists have identified themselves, in one way or another, with *independentista* sentiments, and cultural work has been seen in Puerto Rico as the most important bastion of national defense.... For Puerto Rican artists being 'true' and 'useful' meant taking upon their shoulders the responsibility of defining and defending national cultural identity in the face of political, economic, and cultural policies pressing upon the Puerto Rican society. Their art became the 'bulwark and repository of the essence and values of threatened Puerto Ricanness' (p. 5).

Jack and Irene Delano

The excellent discussion of Jack and Irene Esser Delano includes a short but thorough biography of both artists, which places their backgrounds, early lives, the decision to move to Puerto Rico, and the role in the intellectual and artistic life of these extraordinary individuals within the context of Puerto Rican history. Their association with Puerto Rican art that spans nearly four decades and their dedication to creating a Puerto Rican voice makes them "pioneers" of the artistic tradition that has a social purpose and whose audience was the Puerto Rican people (p. 23).

The Delanos' first trip to Puerto Rico was undertaken in the 1940s while Jack was working for the Farm Security Administration. During that trip they traveled throughout the island, producing more than 10,000 negatives and 700 slides, documenting all aspects of Puerto Rican life. In 1979 they were awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant to travel throughout the island to rephotograph sites previously visited and compare the changes that had taken place. The result was *Contrastes: 40 anos de cambio y continuidad en Puerto Rico* (*Constrasts: 40 Years of Change and Continuity in Puerto Rico*).

The Delanos impact on the culture of Puerto Rico was considerable. The vehicles for their work were the Division de Educacion a la Comunidad (DIVEDCO, the Division of Community Education), WIPR radio and television stations, and the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriquena (ICP, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture). Through DIVEDCO the Delanos, with various Puerto Rican artists, wrote and distributed educational and cultural materials, including books, graphics, photographs, music, dance and theater performances, films, and radio and television programs. The intention of DIVEDCO was to create a repertoire of Puerto Rican cultural resources that spurned Spanish colonial culture in favor of works with Puerto Rican themes, designs, rhythms–works that were intended for Puerto Rican audiences. Through its many efforts, DIVEDCO had an enormous impact on the Puerto Rican peasants who for the first time were presented with materials that mirrored their history and experiences. DIVEDCO also had an immense impact on many future Puerto Rican artists by providing opportunities to work and learn and by channeling their artistic talents along truly nationalistic lines.

The Delanos were involved with many of Puerto Rico's most prestigious professional companies. Jack's musical compositions, based on Puerto Rican folk music, along with those of such esteemed Puerto Rican composers as Hector Campos Parsi and Amaury Veray were instrumental in aiding the creation of the Puerto Rican nationalist school of classical music. Jack provided music for Ana Garcia and Gilda Navarra, dancers-choreographers and founders of Ballets de San Juan (1954). Their goals were to provide a repertoire of dance with which the Puerto Rican audience could identify, to train future dancers and choreographers, and to bring ballet to the people. Garcia and Navarra choreographed; Jack adapted folk stories to create ballets, composed music that incorporated folk themes, and designed sets for various productions; and Irene designed programs and publicity posters. Ballets de San Juan toured the island, taking performances to the people. By the 1960s, the company had developed a program that furnished lessons to children in low-income housing projects.

To underscore the immense variety of contributions of the Delanos to the artistic life of Puerto Rico, one only has to look at the history of the work *Los aguinaldos del Infante*, Tomas Blanco's Christmas tale. The work originally appeared as a book with graphics by Irene in 1954 and was reissued in 1968 and 1976. In 1968, six radio presentations of the talewere aired. For these productions, Irene played the harpsichord; Jack, the viola; and Luis Pales Matos, the esteemed Latin American poet, narrated. In 1984 the story became a production of the Ballets de SanJuan, for which Jack wrote the libretto and the musical score and created the set designs, based on Irene's original graphics. Finally, in 1985 the ballet was presented on television.

Antonio Martorell

Antonio Martorell is one of Puerto Rico's best known graphic artists. The main themes of his works are social criticism and political satire. The author identifies Martorell as heir to the Delano generation of Puerto Rican nationalistic artists, "who have made their country's colonial status the most urgent subject and concern of their works" (p. 61). However, Martorell is distinguished from the previous generation by the fact that, though he continued to work in traditional graphic styles(woodcut and silk-screen) with the traditional anticolonial theme, he did so with experimental techniques that encourage the viewer to be a participant in a political dialogue that Rivera points out is "more necessary if it is taken into account that this art is aimed at a society politically habituated to accept and not to demand or challenge" (p. 62).

Martorell has been "a ubiquitous presence" on the Puerto Rican landscape, working since the 1960s in a variety of media. He studied at the ICP under master graphic artists Lorenzo Homar and Rafael Tufino. His early career was devoted to graphic design and his early involvement in the performing arts began with his designs for sets and posters advertising productions of Ballets de San Juan and for ICP theater festivals.

Yet, even early in his career, Martorell's social commitment was widely apparent. In 1968 he established a graphics workshop, Taller Alacran (Scorpion Workshop), in a storefront in Santurce. The workshop was a meeting place for artists, and Martorell conducted free classes in serigraphy and woodcut printing for deprived youths in an effort to keep them off the streets. To support his social efforts, the shop produced posters and printed textiles, wallpaper, books, cartoons, and clothing, which were sold as galleries and shops throughout the island.

Over the years Martorell became increasingly interested in documenting Puerto Rican history and in using mixed media performances to illuminate specific political issues. He participated in El Tajo del Alacran (The Scorpion's Cut), formed in 1966 by writer-playwright Lydia Milagros Gonzalez and a group of theater people involved in politics. The aim of El Tajo was to "promote an affirmative image of Puerto Ricans as people who could take their country under their own leadership" (p. 67). They worked at the Experimental Theater of the Atone de San Juan, conducting workshops in which Martorell participated and for which he wrote short, satirical scripts.

Other groups Martorell worked with were the mime group, Taller de Histriones, Puerto Rico's outstanding theater group, established by Gilda Navarra in 1971, and Teatreros Ambulantes with Rosa Luisa Marquez, "an active organizer of politically oriented theatre events designed to be performed for specific causes" (p. 76). Performances commemorated historiopolitical events such as the Grito de Lares massacre at Ponce; reacted to specific current political events such as the 1985 FBI raid on dozens of homes and businesses of Puerto Rican *independentistas* and the proposed 1985 U.S. invasion of Nicaragua; or raised public awareness of personal threats such as the dangers of AIDS. Funding came from the Department of Drama of the University of Puerto Rico and the ICP. Most were ensemble works, developed through workshops, directed by Martorell and other luminaries, with the hard work, participation cooperation, and input of many volunteers, often students at the University of Puerto Rico. Performances often were stage only once and took place in the open or in the streets and were free to the public. The audiences were integrated into the performances.

Jaime Suarez

The prestige of Jaime Suarez rests on his international recognition as Puerto Rico's greatest ceramist and a sculptor who defines the medium as an art form rather than a mere craft. He has achieved an international recognition that is rare among Puerto Rico's artists, and he has been linked with some of the most distinguished Puerto Rican theater and dance groups, including Taller de Histriones, Ballet Calichi, Corral de la Cruz, Teatro del Sesenta, and Producciones Aleph.

Trained as an architect and ceramist, Suarez adapted his techniques to stage design. His motif is ritual objects that "point to the presence–or absence–of community with a shared system of beliefs of which only fragments remain" (p. 102). His concern with balancing excellence and practicality worked to the advantage of the Puerto

Rican theater and dance companies, many of which could not afford the price of sets where "at times the cost of a single chair is higher than your fee for doing the whole job" (p. 103). His conception of a set is not that of a background for the performance of a script but rather as an intrinsic part of that performance. His involvement in the totality of the play or ballet reflects his view that the design and materials used for the sets are part and parcel of the entire production rather than an aggregate of unconnected elements.

As resident designer at the Ballets de San Juan since 1984, Suarez has made significant, though at times unorthodox, contributions to productions of classical dance. The originality and sense of independence of Suarez's designs comes across in the sets he developed for *El mensajero de plata*, (*The Silver Messenger*), the first twentieth-century Puerto Rican opera. Commission by the Opera de Camara (Chamber Opera Company), *El mensajero* fulfilled the need to create a national operatic repertoire, one with Puerto Rican themes, by and for Puerto Ricans. It was very well received by critics when it was first performed in 1986, and in 1988 it toured the island and was produced for television. Among the many productions for Ballets de San Juan with which Suarez has is been connected is *Firebird*, which Suarez changed from the original Russian to a Caribbean environment, and *La sylphid*, *Swan Lake* and *Nutcracker*, where he stylized the designs with his characteristic balance of artistic excellence and an unvarying preference for discarded and low cost materials in what he calls a "self-imposed challenge."

Suarez's work consistently supports the idea of the theater as an art and as a discipline. Together with the other artists studied in this book, he belongs to that group of Puerto Rican visual artists who have elevated the theater to a category of art in and of itself. He brought a totally different approach to the design of the classics while at the same time he supported the creation of a Puerto Rican ballet repertoire, and with artists like Ana Garcia, Luis Pales Matos, and Tomas Blanco, helped to shape Puerto Rican cultural values.

Oscar Mestey-Villamil

Like Jaime Suarez, Oscar Mestey-Villamil came to stage design from two other media, painting and dance-choreography. The two main motifs of his works–both visual and theater–are the Harlequin figure and the idea of the play. The author says that at first glance, Mestey's art appears to be childlike and not serious enough to deal with the important political challenges facing the Puerto Rican artists: "the problem of creating an art out of borrowed, imposed or half-owned or non-existent traditions, and at the same time, of resisting cultural penetration from power-radiating centers (the U.S.A. in this particular case)." The author maintains that Mestey confronted these conflicts by "creating an art which proclaims its uniqueness and independence by its self-imposed limitations in forms (circles, squares, and triangles), a European subject (the Harlequin) and a pre-Columbian palette." Because of its independence and self-sufficiency, Mestey's "politically relevant" in the Puerto Rican context (p. 138).

Mestey has been involved in all aspects of theater: choreography, design, direction and performance. Indeed, by the time he had his first exhibition in the plastic arts he had been part of a folk dance group called Retablo Puertorriqueno. In 1975 Gilda Navarra invited Mestey to join Taller de Histriones, and he remained with the company for six years, performing in such acclaimed works as *Asintota*, *Abelardo y Eloisa*, and *Atibon, Ogu Erzuli.* In 1979, Mestey began to work on *Fragmentos o relatos pre-colombinos* (*Fragments or Pre-Columbian Tales*), which was not only conceived, designed, and directed by Mestey but for which he was also one of the performing mimes. *Fragmentos* is an aggregate of excerpts from diverse pre-Columbian texts dealing with myths and tales written by anonymous Native American writers and Spanish chroniclers. It includes a recreation of the ritual ball game as practiced by the Tainos, the original inhabitants of Puerto Rico. It was premiered by Taller de Histriones.

Mestey's association with Taller de Histriones was followed by a very productive period in which he collaborated mainly with theatre director and actress Rosa Luisa Marquez. After a number of works where Mestey provided the designs for Marquez, the two of them began to work on the charming children's story, *La leyenda de l Cemi* (*The Legend of the Cemi*), one of the most frequently performed plays in Puerto Rican theater. In 1984 he collaborated with Marquez and writer Ana Lydia Vega on *Deja eso Reagan* (*Leave that Alone, Reagan*), a short skit about the proposed use by the Reagan administration of Puerto Rico's National Guard in the civil wars raging in Central America at that time.

All this time Mestey had missed the chance to dance and choreograph. In 1985 he was invited by University of Puerto Rico at Humacao to present an exhibition of his painting and a dance performance on the evening of the exhibit's opening. Here he had the opportunity to present a retrospective show of mask, stage props, sketches, and other of his theater-related works. For the dance performance, Mestey choreographed *Ar-*

lequinando (*Harlequinating*), a new solo which provided him with the opportunity to make extensive used of his favorite artistic motif, the Harlequin figure. Other solos include *Estampas*, a worked based on a nineteenth - century painting critical of the conditions of Puerto Rico in the last years of Spanish domination; *En azul* (*In Blue*), danced to Andean music; and *Ahora* (*Ahora*), choreographed in the jazz idiom to music of Erik Satie. He went on to choreograph and design the costumes for *Rito* (*Rite*), a piece for the Ballet Concierto de Puerto Rico.

Through his approach, Mastey has created a unique contemporary Puerto Rican experimental dance. While he is one of the few male choreographers presently working in Puerto Rico, his visual and theater arts, however, remain unrecognized. Because of the seriousness of his artistic commitment, and the strong personality and independent quality of his art, Mestey's work is representative of twentieth century Puerto Rican art.

Conclusion

In the final, thought-provoking chapter, "Outside the Multicultural/Global 1990s," the author examines the role of the artist both inside and outside of a colonial society. He claims that the range and versatility of the artists presented in the book are "not an exception in Puerto Rico." He attributes this adaptability to necessity born of the lack of opportunities and resources available to the artist. The sheer numbers of artists on the island, he says, speaks to the artists' belief that they have a significant role in preserving their national identity, and the presence of so many women at the top of all aspects of art testifies to the perceived unimportance of art in the minds of the ruling classes.

To the question of why Puerto Rican art is not better known outside of the island, the author maintains that if there is a Puerto Rican art, there is a Puerto Rican nation, and the existence of a Puerto Rican nation puts into question the island's colonial status. He says: "This is the reason why art-making in Puerto Rico cannot be anything but a political act which, regardless of the artist's intentions, challenges the existing political situation" (p. 169). Puerto Rico's colonial status prevents the establishment of cultural embassies, participation in the artistic undertakings of UNESCO, or access to international art shows other than by private efforts.

However, the author says, the responsibility does not belong exclusively to those who do not want to acknowledge or deal with the thorny issue of the colonial status of the island. Outsiders question whether the small population of the island could turn out an art of any concern to the rest of the world. Many Latin Americans believe that Puerto Ricans think of themselves as "United States Americans" and think of them as traitors to their Latin American roots. Adding injury to insult, this perception is often reinforced by the simplistic view that Puerto Rico is only a vacation paradise, void of culture, where there is little or no room for intellectual endeavors (p. 169). However throughout the book, from the historic perspective of the introduction to the discussions of the artists to the analysis in this last chapter, the picture that emerges of Puerto Rico is that of a vital place, where artificiality, particularly in the theater cannot exist and where artists can not hide in ivory towers or in university classrooms where they sometimes teach. Puerto Rico appears as a multidimensional treasure-chest of artistic creativity, where art and artists nurture their needs in the richness of the Afro-Hispanic-Caribbean folk art.

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