

Cultural Wars and the Individual Artist

a talk with visual artist Angel Rodriguez-Diaz

by Susan Guerra

Angel Rodriguez-Diaz, a Puerto Rican artist, and resident of San Antonio after many years of living in New York City, opens his "*Splendid Little War*" art show in December, as part of the ArtPace artist-in-residence program. He has interwoven a bit of community activism as part of this opening, with his "call for pennies."

His art work also acts as an element of his community involvement, as well as

using my own image as a metaphor of the community of people of color. What happens to the individual is what happens to the community at another level."

"*Splendid Little War*" is the title of his show which opens December 10th. His concern with colonization comes to life with this exhibit, spurred by the 100 year anniversary of the Spanish - American War. His experiences as a Puerto Rican growing up in Puerto Rico and his adult life spent in the United States, has allowed Rodriguez-Diaz to consider

because people lived in this region prior to these wars of territorial, economic and cultural expansionism."

It is in the painting entitled "*At the Turn of the Century in San Antonio*", that Rodriguez-Diaz depicts the relationships he sees involved in colonization. I spoke with him about this particular painting. He says, "This painting refers to colonization (of the Americas and its inhabitants), not only in a historical framework but also as to how people perceive of themselves, particularly people of color." It is part of a series of paintings, actually a self-portrait among objects painted in a still-life form. The images on the canvas

include a map of the Antilles, the tail end of Cuba and a post card of a landscape from Puerto Rico which breaks the space and flatness of the map into an illusionistic space, going into the island of Puerto Rico.

Other symbols are comments on the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. A holy card depicts the blonde and white archangel Michael on top of the black devil. The archangel, who administers judgement, holds a balance, the symbol for justice and due punishment. Nearby this image, the self-portrait in the mirror, and the detail of an eye on a milagro piece, are items which convey an alert look, a certain awareness.

Along with these references of individual relationships, there are also references to nations and territories. The "*Anima Sola*", the lonely soul image also on a holy card, is the painter's description of his homeland, a country which as a result of colonization, exists in a sort of limbo. It is not a real part of Latin America nor is it a real part of the United States, but since the Spanish American War, it too is as lone as the figure on the holy card,



his particular interest in portraiture. His visual themes link the individual to a broader context of reality and he considers portrait painting as a means to represent historical and social mores condensed into a sense of self. He states, "You are born alone. You go to the grave alone. You must start with yourself. I'm

colonization from many perspectives. "The situation here (in Texas) is different from ordinary migration. The result of war was a change of borders, of nations and therefore a change of citizenship. People think that Spanish is spoken here because people have migrated here from Mexico. But its

in the midst of flames signifying a constant and endless consumption of culture and resources.

The figures of a Mexican man and a Mexican woman, in close proximity to the Alamo which he uses as a symbol for oppression, is the focus on the Mexican heritage prevalent amongst the people of this region. There are images which include references to the entire Carribean, African-Carribean mythology, pre-Columbian culture, the incurrence of Catholicism along with the conquests in this part of the world. Dollars and coins painted onto the canvas add up to the commemorative year, \$18.98.



Angel Rodriguez-Diaz wants to create a dialogue with the public with his portrait painting, which is why he chooses to paint a context for his self-portrait which represents reality according to how the individual perceives this. He explains how he feels about the relation between the personal, the intellectual and the emotional in his art.

"Art gains its power when it transcends the object. A painting is more than the paint, more than the canvas, more than the stone if we are working with sculpture, or more than a picture of a meadow. Art makes you think. It can act as a metaphor, just as poetry helps you recall images from your personal experience. An individual can have a particular experience which makes art personal. The subject matter in portrait painting, even my own face, is what is commonly used for identification, like a fingerprint. I use the face to create a visibility as a latino."

"As an outsider, and I have lived here in San Antonio for four years now, I see how the Mexican American is invisible from the major art institutions. There is a lack of a collection of Mexican American art in a city with a majority Mexican American population. I see no efforts from the mainstream establishments to accomplish this. The only effort comes from the Mexican Americans themselves. And its been a struggle with a lot of

resistance from the dominant culture. A democratic society should include this representation (of Mexican American art)."

The artist agrees that there is a growing awareness of the importance of art in this community. Also, that public recognition of the local (Mexican American) community's arts contributions must be reconciled through public funding of arts organizations which promote and encourage diversity in the arts. Rodriguez-Diaz adds "The problem here is that so far history has not yet acknowledged the culture (and cultural expressions) of poor people."

The existence of cultural wars here in the city is why Angel Rodriguez-Diaz wanted the Esperanza Center to receive the money raised at the opening of his art show "Splendid Little War."

"I thought that since I am dealing with the theme of war, war as conquest, and the effects of these wars on territories and cultures, this reminded me that there still exists cultural wars as a result. There is a cultural resistance, a stubbornness (from the dominant culture) to maintain and keep a certain image of the (Mexican American) people here in San Antonio. The Esperanza Center has been sort of like an underdog (in this cultural war) because it takes care of the issues no one else (other arts institutions) wants to deal with. Perhaps this is because the issues (of cultural equity) are too complex or are too socio-politically related, and do

not only concentrate on aesthetics. But I think you cannot separate one thing from the other. Art is about the people. You cannot divide people. People are who they are and their cultural expression reflects this. The Esperanza Center has maintained a space (for diversity of the arts) against all odds. Having this opportunity, I felt that it was a chance to address issues in the community, and in a very low key manner, to make a small contribution to draw attention to what is happening. Also, I wanted to raise a bit of money, although a symbolic amount. The main gesture is to inform the public and if people are informed, hopefully they will respond and I will have helped secure support for the Esperanza Center from an even broader community."

In my opinion it is not only in his painting "At the Turn of the Century in San Antonio" in which Angel Rodriguez-Diaz creates a dialogue and a space for interaction. His "call for pennies" on December 10th creates a concrete connection between two very different art organizations. While ArtPace promotes established artists, the Esperanza Center provides the grounds for a broad base of artists in development of their own expression. These are interesting and interdependant contrasts he brings together through his art show. Angel Rodriguez-Diaz and his "Splendid Little War" series may already have done just what the artist believes, "Art transcends the object when it creates a sense of space, when something you make creates a consciousness in the minds of the viewer. This is what makes art successful." ☀

As a symbolic gesture the artist, Angel Rodriguez-Diaz, urges everyone to bring a penny, or pennies, to the opening night of "Splendid Little War" on December 10, 1998 from 6:30 to 8:30pm at ArtPace, 445. N. Main Ave. and deposit them in the soldiers helmets which will be on display. Whatever is collected will be donated to the Esperanza Center, a non-profit institution that, Rodriguez-Diaz says, "against all odds still stands as a metaphor of 'hope' for all of us that believe in freedom."

