

New York museum exhibit features ordinary people of extraordinary vision

Leo J. O'Donovan | May. 4, 2012



Ejlal Feuer, "CataÒo, East 110th Street, East Harlem, Manhattan," 1966 (Photos courtesy of El Museo del Barrio)

Nowhere in New York these days is there punchier, closer-to-earth religious art than at El Museo del Barrio on upper Fifth Avenue. The exhibition there, "Testimonios: 100 Years of Popular Expression," has lots more than religious material. Its point is to show how largely self-taught or folk artists have imagined their world, and its more than 300 pieces trace the interplay of family life, cultural heritage, community relations, dislocation, oppression and liberation.

But religious experience, both indigenous and imported, is unsurprisingly a prominent part of the mix, with compellingly fresh and direct work running the gamut from sentimental presentations of Our Lady of Guadalupe to harrowing interpretations of the Crucifixion as a prison experience. The show runs through May 6, but most of the material comes from El Museo's permanent collection.

Founded in 1969 by Puerto Rican artists, teachers and community leaders from the East Harlem barrio and led by artist-educator Raphael Montañez Ortiz, El Museo del Barrio was first dedicated to preserving and fostering the artistic heritage of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Gradually its mission broadened, not without controversy, and came to include the Caribbean basin and Latin America in general. In 1977 it found a permanent home in the neoclassical Heckscher Building at 1230 Fifth Avenue. For El Museo's 40th anniversary that rather forbidding site (it had been an orphanage) underwent extensive renovations and reopened three years ago to widespread acclaim. A new glass façade, a redesigned courtyard, modernized galleries, and a large café that can also be used for programming now signal a welcoming and revitalized institution.

"Testimonios" begins with a prologue of two New Testament scenes by Raimundo de Oliveira in 1963 that are among the strongest pieces in the exhibition (their strong color contrasts and repetitive patterning are typical of the best of what follows). The first full gallery then offers a series of wide-angle photographs from the 1990s by Ejlal Feuer, an Israeli artist who explored Latino community gardens in El Barrio, the Lower East Side and the South Bronx. Re-creating their tropical origins, residents of these neighborhoods built casitas, or small houses, around which they would sweep clearings and then plant lush flowers and greenery. Feuer's photographs show

his new friends relaxing, dancing, spending hot afternoons together, sometimes protesting the encroachment of building development projects on their small oases in the city. Foregrounding some of his shots with thick undergrowth, Feuer achieves effects uncannily reminiscent of the Douanier Rousseau or a paper forest scene photographed by Thomas Demand.

Nestled among these stolen scenes of Eden are vitrines with a lovely selection from El Museo's well-known collection of santos, small devotional figures of Christ, the Virgin and the saints made of carved and, generally, painted wood. Most of those displayed come from Puerto Rico and date from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries. Among the figures with secure attribution, the standouts include Norberto Cedeño's 'St. Francis of Assisi' (circa 1970s) and Domingo Orta's 'St. Lazarus' (1981). There's also a theologically fascinating 'Holy Trinity' (19th century) from the Cabán Workshop and, easily the most imposing of all, Cedeño's 'All-Powerful Hand of Christ' (circa 1950), with the wounded hand of the Savior bearing a little figure at the end of each finger.



Shifting gears to a darker mood, curator Deborah Cullen mixes vodun

banners and madama Dolls. The black cloth dolls, reaching back culturally to African spiritism, come from the collection of Dr. Manuel Aulí, who used them in treating patients with emergency trauma. The banners, especially those by the great Haitian artist Antoine Oleyant (1955-92), are sensational. With sequins of various colors sewn on velvet (or, later, nylon cloth) and a small green bead attached to the center of each sequin, Oleyant re-creates the vodun (commonly called voodoo) world and its pantheon of spirits known as loa. In one, a stylized image of the spirit Ghede rides merrily on the sacred bull Bossou. Nearby, Bossou appears alone, at once fearsome and friendly (a Haitian variant on Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). Another Haitian artist, George Valsis, portrays the Crucifixion, likewise with deft composition, telling manipulation of scale, and a freedom of line worthy of Miró. The palette of these banners is brilliant throughout, but dazzles (and plays with depth effects) all the more as light shimmers on it.

The strong sense of tradition and community that supports such art is immediately evident in the molas of the Kuna women from the islands off the coast of Panama. Molas are appliquéd panels that reproduce now in cloth the geometrically patterned images of plants, animals and mythological figures the women once painted directly on their bodies. When the Kuna began to make the panels for their blouses, a certain standardization in scale developed, but the patterns created are amazingly varied. In the 1960s the art form began to be commercialized, and the panels were assembled in community houses or cooperatives known as *congresos*. Since the first missionaries in the early 20th century, biblical themes have become common, but also baseball (of course) and occasionally political figures.



For all the importance of cooperative community, however, nothing can replace

individual creativity, and El Museo's display of the marvelous sculptural menagerie created by Gregorio Marzán proves the point. Born in Puerto Rico in 1906, Marzán immigrated to New York in 1937 and was eventually able to bring four of his children to the city. (His wife and daughter died in Puerto Rico.) After retiring from his job in a toy factory in 1971 and until his death in 1997, he created a Noah's ark of brilliantly colored, whimsical and utterly beguiling fish, birds and animals. It's hard to know what to love most -- the lion or goat wall-pieces, the striped dog or striped giraffes, the fly or the grasshopper or the cat. And almost all of it was made from materials Marzán found on the street -- or bought at Woolworth's. "Nobody taught me," he once said. "I made from the brain."

The art of paños, on the other hand, was made from imprisonment. These are cotton handkerchief drawings, originally made with fountain pens and then with ballpoint pens, by Mexican-American men serving time near San Antonio in the mid-90s. More than 100 of these "letters" to families, lovers and friends are included in "Testimonios," and if the walls covered with them become somewhat oppressive, the curatorial intention to evoke the isolating intensity of prison life more than justifies itself. The men used very ordinary models -- cartoons, popular magazines, pornography. But the results are often startlingly sweet or savage, traditionally religious (Guadalupe) or fiercely so (prison as the place of crucifixion), surreal (crazed clowns) or escapist (cars, cars and more cars). Some names may also fix themselves in your memory: Eddie Medel, Rogelio Perez, Paul Nuñez. You wonder what they would make of your remembering them.



"Remembering" is one of the key themes in the climactic final gallery of the show, dedicated

to the arpilleras, or wall hangings made in Chile between the coup that overthrew Salvador Allende Gossens in 1973 and the democratic election of Patricio Aylwyn in 1990. Encouraged by the Catholic bishops' Vicariate of Solidarity, mothers, wives and sisters began to make these small pieces by attaching scraps of cloth to burlap food-sack backings. Displayed densely on three walls at El Museo, the work is effective not so much through delicate craft but through homely recollection of life before and, in hope, after the violent repression of the military junta. The sun often shines in the middle of the scene. Mountains are made of flowered cloth. Children sail little boats named Peace and Liberty and Love in a pond beneath the great "Dove Solidarity." And roads cross and re-cross the scenes, seeking "the disappeared." At the end of the gallery, several recent "cloth cactus" pieces made from border patrol uniforms by Margarita Cabrera, who works with female immigrants from Mexico, indicate how such a tradition can be re-created with contemporary relevance.

Cullen has noted that in El Museo's rotating exhibitions every few years, "we make a special effort to focus on

popular works from our permanent collection ... which comprise one-tenth of our holdings [6,500 objects]. The public will be surprised and delighted by the rich stories that each of these works reveal. The work in the current show indeed tells compelling stories -- of immigrant life and social repression, religious undercurrents and the wonder of the world's variety. But it also reminds us how the artistic impulse can burst forth in glorious and liberating ways, dreamlike, intense, and emotionally immediate. Ordinary people of extraordinary vision, untutored but true, can re-create the experience of life with and for their fellow sojourners. The vigor of the way they see, their naiveté, persuades without pressuring, is compassionate without compulsion, helps us to get up and start over, wherever we have failed or fallen. How shall we recognize such artists in time to come? For we surely need them. How shall we recognize them?

Only by looking very carefully.

[Jesuit Fr. Leo O'Donovan is president emeritus of Georgetown University in Washington and a frequent commentator on the arts for *NCR*.]

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