

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

Jose F. Rios' Barrio Dreams

A harrowing story with a happier ending is that of Jose F. Rios, a self taught artist born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City, who recently had an impressive first solo show of paintings at Gelabert Studios, 255 West 86th Street. Like Claude Brown, the author of "Manchild in the Promised Land," Rios is a ghetto kid who overcame the odds- but not without difficulty: Although he loved to draw and his talent was obvious from childhood, he was an alcohol abuser and a heroin addict by age eleven, To escape a turbulent family life, he left home at sixteen and ended up living in the streets for ten years. Still doing drugs, sleeping in a cardboard box in the Village, he used his creative talents to survive as best he could, scavenging for junk to create funky assemblages that he sold on the streets. But he supplemented his income by selling another kind of "junk"-drugs-and was finally busted for dealing.

Prisons don't have a great record for rehabilitating people, but Rios, once again, was the gifted exception: he rehabilitated himself No longer scuffling to survive on the streets -one of the toughest full-time jobs in the world!-lots of time on his hands, he began to draw again.

Soon he was talking commissions from other prisoners to draw portraits of their families and actually making a living, of sorts, from his art. If he could do this well in jail, he reasoned, then there might still be hope for him in on the outside.

So far, so good. Since his release from prison, Rios has been clean and sober. He supplements the income from the sale of his paintings by working as a carpenter, and he has reunited with a formerly estranged daughter who now acts as his agent. All of this would be simply another "human interest" story, the stuff of tabloid journalism

rather than art criticism, if not for the fact that his first solo show at Gelabert Studios revealed Jose F. Rios to be an exceptionally gifted genre painter whose pictures pulse with the same infectious salsa beat as the verses of the Puerto Rican poet Emilio Cruz and the plays of the late Miguel "Mikey" Pinero, author of "Short Eyes."

Part of the power in his work comes from the fact that Rios paints what he knows by heart: In "Hope," a single dandelion growing through a crack in the sidewalk is taken as a positive omen by a homeless man living in a cardboard box; in "Subsiding Demons," a man recently released from prison still must deal with demons whispering in his ears;



Jose F Rios with his paintings

"Windows" offers rich glimpses into the varied lives of tenement buildings, its bricks and other details evoked with atmosphere exactitude reminiscent of the late Martin Wong. Jose F. Rios paints the life of the inner city- its rotten-tooth tenements, prison-like housing projects, flypaper bodegas, crumbling schools, treacherous playgrounds, and too-often-thwarted aspirations with an authenticity and passion that should not be ignored. Rios is The Real Deal.