

GALLERY&STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

Jose F. Rios Painting as Autobiography and Salvation

Born in New York City to Puerto Rican parents in 1923, Tito Puente, known affectionately to his millions of fans as "El Rev," was one of the most esteemed and beloved figures in Latin music. A composer, arranger, band leader, and percussionist especially proficient in the twin drums known as timbales, Puente, who died in May of 2000, after 60 years in the music business, was more than a musician. He was an outspoken, globe-trotting good will ambassador who broke through numerous cultural barriers in the early days of Latin American music, and continued to perform regularly up to right before his death from complications following heart surgery

There have been many tributes to Puente since, but none expresses his iconographic stature more dramatically than "Magic Wand," a painting by the Puerto Rican-American artist Jose F. Rios, in his second New York solo exhibition, "Jewels of the Lost Artist II: The story continues..." at Gelabert Studios Gallery, 255 West 86th Street, from December 17 through January 18, 2003. (There will be a reception for the Artist on Tuesday, December 17th, from 5 to 9 PM.)

The "magic wand" of the title refers to the drum-stick that the great salsa showman brandishes high above his head with charlatanistic flamboyance in Rios' portrait, which captures an unmistakable likeness of Puente, with his frill head of wavy white hair, his characteristically animated expression, his black bow tie and sharp white tux. From the tip of Tito's upraised drum-stick stream beams of light, magical auras as from the halo of a saint enhancing the sense that this portrait is actually an icon—as, indeed, Puente was to his people.

As in a Byzantine icon, Rios' portrait of Puente contains other elements related to the main figure. Here, however, the brown brick buildings with people looking out of their windows, seen behind Puente as he plays his timbales, are not merely symbolic.

Along with performing in concert halls around the world, Puente often played for free at street festivals in "El Barrio"

and other inner city neighborhoods, because he never forgot where he came from. and the same can be said for Jose F. Rios, a painter schooled in the streets and in prison, whose success story can be compared to that of Pin Thomas, of the best-selling autobiography, "Down These Mean Streets."

Discovering Rios's first New York solo shows "Jewels of the Lost Artist," at Gelabert Gallery last year was a revelation similar to discovering the work of Charlotte Salomon, a voting artist who created over 800 paintings tracing the events of her life leading up to her untimely death in Auschwitz at age 26, in a posthumous retrospective at The Jewish Museum a few years ago. The important difference, of course, is that Rios' life story is ongoing, and that the strength and beauty in his paintings comes from the transcendence of bitterness and the peculiar alchemy by which art can transform experience.

Since Rios' story has been told in print before, and is rapidly becoming part of his legend, the bare facts will suffice here, lest its human interest upstage what a truly fine painter he is: Born in Puerto Rico in 1954,

"MAGIC WAND"

raised in a New York tenement, his talent was evident from early childhood. But like a lot of poor ghetto kids, he got hooked on drugs and alcohol. As an adult, he ended up living in a cardboard box on the streets for ten years, and eventually got busted for dealing. In prison, he kicked drugs and began to paint in earnest. On release, he was reunited with his formerly estranged daughter who organized his first solo show last year, which garnered him favorable reviews and a growing following among gallery goers and collectors.

Perhaps Rios' signature work, the painting which best symbolizes his ability to find beauty in the midst of adversity is "Hope," one of only two pieces held over from his first solo show, which depicts a single dandelion growing through a crack in the sidewalk, seen from the perspective of a homeless man living in a cardboard box.

Other powerful paintings in the present show include "Prayer," which depicts a little Hispanic boy with an Elmo backpack, standing back shyly from a 9/11 memorial gathering, saving a quiet prayer for the victims as their spirits rise in an ethereal haze illuminated by many candles.



Another work, entitled "All of We," is a diptych with the two panels depicting the Twin Towers, their surfaces overlaid by the stars and stripes and covered by deep cracks, their windows filled with flags of many nations, symbolizing Americans from all corners of the world who, as Rios puts it, "felt the blow of September 11th." Even as Rios broadens the scope of his art to embrace a variety of subjects, some of his most powerful paintings are still his autobiographical ones. Among the most moving of these is the acrylic on canvas entitled "Christmas 95." Here, we see a homeless couple huddled together, sharing a grimy green blanket, in a makeshift tent. Against one side of their humble shelter, a scrawny pine tree slumps precariously, decorated with found objects. Nearby is a shopping cart, filled with the couples few belongings. Yet, the deep blue of the night sky is enlivened by a numinous glow, as though emanating from the Star of Bethlehem. The light from above reflects off the shadow's carpet of snow surrounding the tent, and the entire scene is permeated by an atmospheric serenity suggesting that these two destitute souls have found their own sense of Peace on Earth—at least in this one spiritually illuminated moment of respite from their desperate daily existence. It is in these isolated epiphanies and rare moments that give us the strength to go out in the face of adversity that Jose F. Rios finds inspiration and his own ultimate salvation — Ed McCormack