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Journey from home

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JOURNEY FROM HOME
A Quest for an Identity

M.F.A Exhibition Paper

by

BENJAMIN P. VARELA

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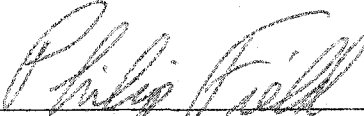
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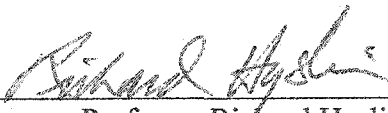
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Abstract: An Introduction to the Personal "Me"

My art is built on a foundation of personal experiences: First, as a child in New York City and Puerto Rico, and second, as a man learning his craft in universities and workshops in Wisconsin, Illinois, Texas, and Mexico. I categorize this deductive process as the emergence of the personal "Me," because most artists develop a visual language of signs and symbols that has been shaped by the artist's family, education, and personal experiences. It is also a deductive process that has shaped the personal "Me" through an analysis of my movement away from pernicious generalities, characterized by living under mistaken ethnic and cultural assumptions, toward a specific ethnic and cultural identity based on the discovery of my Puerto Rican identity and the realization that I am also a Latino artist.

Regarding the issue of ethnic and cultural identity, many minority artists confront two problems: First, in shaping their art within the Western canon of aesthetics; second, by exploring the meaning of their personal "Me" vis-à-vis their relationship with their ethnic community or communities. Critic James D. Cockcroft cogently affirms the importance of community for many Puerto Rican and, especially relevant to me, many mainland-born Latino artists:

Latino artists have a strong commitment to making art a part of public life, whether in the home, on the side of a building, or at a bus stop. It is art to be seen and enjoyed by everyone."¹

My art is community specific, i.e. Puerto Rican and Latino, a model which has been employed by other minority artists such as Haitian-Puerto Rican artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, who elevated urban graffiti into mainstream art, Brooklyn-born Puerto Rican Rafael Tufiño, who celebrated his Puerto Rican heritage in bold strokes on linoleum prints meant for mass diffusion, and Chicana artist Santa C. Barraza, who created a modern iconography based on Chicano and Mexican folk traditions. I situate my art in this realm by employing iconic and allegorical fantasy coupled with Puerto Rican, Latino, and indigenous traditions from the United States, the Caribbean, and Mesoamerica.

My use of fantasy involves a vocabulary of visual images that share two specific elements. They are, first, community based, and, second, they are memory specific, acting as metaphors to transform my past into art that works on two levels: a surface context, i.e. the subject of the painting, and a sub-context, i.e. the underlying meaning of my work. In real terms, as I draw one icon, it acts as a catalyst to produce another image until I have accumulated a complete design, charged with the energy of my emotions, expressed conceptually through the subject matter's imagery and subversively as I exaggerate them on canvas or paper.

What I do is not a reaction to visual objects, but a reaction to my mind's impulses. By heightening awareness, I produce art based on the personal "Me." However, I do not want to leave the impression that these images are mere random impulses drawn from my subconscious. In reality, they are shaped by a willful intention that articulates and transforms ideas and experiences into visual forms. This is what I call the power of the image.

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Aesthetic Theory

Transforming memories into art, the underlying foundation of my craft, is both iconic and allegorical, a deductive quest to establish an identity, the personal "Me," by fusing indigenous Caribbean and Mesoamerican concepts within the Western canon of aesthetics. The other focus of my aesthetic theory is an exploration of my personal history within the context of my life story and its impact on my development as an artist. As a Brooklyn-born Puerto Rican, I become aware, although I received my artistic training in the United States, that I was not really part of the artistic mainstream. As Cockcroft observed:

Not too long ago, though, Latino art--whether created by artists in Latin America, the United States or, like Botero, in Europe--was thought to be too flashy, too political or merely "folk art." To be sure, occasional controversial artists attracted attention and acclaim--such as Los Tres Grandes (The Three Greats): Mexico's muralists Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. Others, including modern masters like Cuban artist Wifredo Lam and Chilean artist Roberto Matta, achieved recognition in the United States only after they had established reputations in Europe. Others seemed to be invisible, like Rafael Tufiño of Puerto Rico, who remained unrecognized by those 'fine art institutions that tell us what should and should not be called "art." ²

The United States has welcomed many, if not all, of the major art movements from Europe, but it has never experienced anything quite like an art movement that fuses, in the Latino context, personal identity with cultural and nationalistic awareness. An art historian may argue persuasively that the Harlem Renaissance was the first

minority art movement that found mainstream acceptance in the United States. Such a project, tempting as it may be, fails because the Harlem Renaissance was better known for its writers than for its visual artists.³ My strategy is predicated on developing an artistic language that merges my ancestral (Puerto Rican) roots and cultural (Latino) heritage within the Western canon of art. The work that I am prepared to create is not a documentary of my life, but, rather, it is a reaction to experiences that have welled up from my subconscious and have been visually transformed.

A community is a body of people living in the same place and living under the same circumstances, but there is also a cultural factor that is expressed in a community's visual symbols or icons. My aesthetic theory incorporates these visual communal elements to explore and explain my artistic vision. One of the central images in this exploration is the image of *la casita* or house to represent where I came from and where I am going. In my opinion, the Maya civilization used the hut to symbolize the impermanence of life although I have no proof of it. Congruently, the ancient Maya may have believed that the house or hut was where humanity originated. If it true, many of their ancient ruins, particularly their pyramids and temples, are endowed on their sides or tops with the symbol or actual form of the generic Maya hut. This idea stems from a myth of the *Siete Cuevas* or Seven Caves, the mythic place of the origin of humanity for all of the principal Mesoamerican civilizations.⁴ However, the fact is that, while some peoples are still looking for the *Siete Cuevas* in the Americas, the myth is actualized all around us. (See fig. 11. p. 49. Casa Amarilla) Every structure you see is a *casita*, a hut, a *cueva* in the symbolic sense.

My *casita* reflects the layers of ethnicity and the cultures that have influenced and informed my experiences as a Puerto Rican and as a Latino artist. Most Puerto Ricans

possess three major racial and ethnic components: Spanish, African, and Indigenous.

Each one of these identities contains layers of history that I have employed to develop a visual narrative.

The History of My Personal "Me"

New York City

My art is not a pastiche of unrelated images on a canvas. There is an order to these images that cohere within a specific historical/cultural context—my family history. My parents were born and raised in Puerto Rico. They were both part of that great migratory movement that demographically changed Puerto Rico from a primarily agricultural society to one that was urban and industrial. This economic transformation was not limited to movement from the Puerto Rican countryside to the island's urban centers, but instead involved a complete physical removal from Puerto Rico to seek work primarily on the east coast of the United States.⁵ My parents joined that great migratory surge from the island to New York City in 1946. A year later, they were married. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, on March 14, 1955, the second of two sons. We lived just south of the Brooklyn Navy Yard in the Admiral David Farragut Apartments, just blocks from the Williamsburg Bridge spanning the East River to Manhattan. As these were my years as an infant and toddler, I am keenly aware of the fragmentary nature of my first memories, which like glass shards catch fragmentary reflections of polished surfaces. Memories of my mother strolling me around the park, the way the air played on my face and hair, are just two examples of simple memories that informed my personal "Me."

At night, when my mother settled me in my crib, I would always face the window. From that vantage I could see the moon illuminating the trestles of the Williamsburg Bridge, leaving an impression that could only be described as mysterious: The night sky's

magic light had cast its spell on my psyche. The night also figured prominently on another occasion. As a cadet in a military school in Tarrytown, New York, Friday night was movie night. They showed films starring Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, and Humphrey Bogart, but it was a science fiction film that caught my attention, Georges Méliès' A Trip to the Moon, (*Le Voyage dans la Lune*). Based on Jules Verne's From the Earth to the Moon, it had a scene of a rocket ship shot from a cannon at an anthropomorphized moon. As soon as the shell landed, the moon flinched in pain with the shell protruding from its right eye.

I believe children have the ability to understand the world through the transformative power of fantasy. After all, there is a surrealistic quality to everyday life that is more akin to the complexity of quantum physics, even to chaos theory, than it is to the orderly world views of classic Greek and Newtonian physics.⁶ As Isaac Newton organized his world with math formulas, he has imagination to do so. As a child, I had an imagination that found its expression in art. Elephants and birds, whales and ships, airplanes and spaceships were the themes I employed to establish the foundation of my personal "Me." These fantasies helped me to order the things I was experiencing as a child, but they also allowed me to create liberated worlds where serpents had three heads, one of many species of animals not found anywhere on earth that assuaged my boredom.

My childhood coincided with the immigrant phase of my life, because my parents had ambitions. They wanted a better life, so they tried to expand my horizons with family visits to parks, amusement arcades, and museums. These visits paid dividends later, when I became aware that life had a certain order, despite my enthusiasm

for three-headed serpents. I came to observe the functional order of things; for example, how wheels on cars are round and not square. These family trips also had a deep influence on the development of my personal "Me." On one trip to Coney Island in Brooklyn, I saw an anchor at the entrance of a parking lot. I looked to my father for an explanation, and he answered that anchors were to ships like brakes were to cars. He pumped the brake to communicate this concept, and I felt the car come to a stop. Consequently, mixing metaphors like my father, I will sometimes depict cars parked by means of their anchors. Parents have a high degree of influence in the development of memory.

Puerto Rico: The History of My Ethnic Identity

In July, 1964, when I was eleven, my family returned to Puerto Rico as part of the larger mass migratory cycle back to the island. The Sixties and the early Seventies were Puerto Rico's economic golden age. The local economy was booming from the influx of tourist dollars and the availability of cheap petroleum. It has to be remembered that prior to 1958, Cuba was the preferred Caribbean destination for travelers from the United States and Europe. However, with the success of Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution, and the subsequent embargo by the United States and its allies of that revolution, Puerto Rico became the destination for tourists fleeing the chill of northern winters.⁷ Operation bootstrap was a Luis Muñoz Marin's Program that helps improve the common Puerto Rican to improve his economic picture.⁸ It was still going on when I came to the Island in 1964, my father politics did not include revolution except in voting. It was here in Puerto Rico that I was exposed to another culture of politics that revolve around the politics of status in Puerto Rico, one of which I had but only small clues while growing up in New York.

Puerto Rico became my home for twelve years. At first, I felt that I was in another world, where extreme poverty co-existed with extreme wealth and middle class stability. My parents had left the island poor children of the Puerto Rican countryside. They returned comfortably situated in the upper middle class. The move forced massive changes in my life. The Caribbean was a strange place that both repelled and seduced me all at the same time. Living in New York I thought I was an Anglo kid, watching the

same television programs, eating similar foods, and sharing the same experiences as my friends next door. At school we all practiced fire drills by going down a staircase in orderly fashion and learning how to wait patiently for your turn. The president was John F. Kennedy, then three years later Lyndon Baines Johnson. The United States space program was in a dead heat in its race to the moon with the Soviet Union. On television, I watched My Three Sons and the Red Skelton Show. English was my first, and only, language.

When I moved to Puerto Rico, I could not speak Spanish, and it took me several years to gain fluency and the awareness that I was not different—that I was a Puerto Rican. I, indeed, had a specify identity, not as an Anglo kid, but as a Puerto Rican, but one who had been blinded to his true identify. For almost fifteen years, I thought I was an Anglo kid from the borough of Queens. I have struggled trying to synthesize, in symbolic terms, the essence of this ethnic dislocation. I remember a Saturday afternoon in 1964, prior to our move to Puerto Rico, when I was in my bedroom glancing through a Superman comic book. There was an ad, in the back pages, advertising chameleons. Actually, these lizards were not true chameleons, but a type of anole called the false chameleon, which is found in most of the Caribbean.⁹ Anoles have the ability, like the chameleon, to change colors, except they have only a limited color palette, specifically, green-yellow to brown. They also do not even look like chameleons, hence the name false chameleon. I was like a false chameleon in that I was a Puerto Rican, who thought he was an Anglo, who came to realize that he was really a Puerto Rican. This is what makes the false chameleon a facsimile, and not the real thing. This creature captured the essence of the illusion I had about myself. Although I thought I was a chameleon, I turned out to be just a false chameleon. Yet, ironically, the anole is a

creature native to Puerto Rico. I employed this icon in a simple floating lizard in my art, mostly in paintings, representing mistaken identity.

When I was an adolescent living in Puerto Rico, we owned a clock in the shape of a cat that we hung in the kitchen. Its tail was a pendulum. One day my brother told me that my living pet cat had been run over by a truck. This sent me into a deep depression, because I had seen him just moments before. However, the depression immediately lifted when he walked into the living room grease-stained and gritty with dirt, but uninjured. I had no idea how he had survived, but I remember thinking that if I only could see through cat's eyes, I would know the truth.

My mother said that cats have nine lives, and that mine had just expended one of them. I eternalized my cat in a painting, where a *casita* embodying immortality mysteriously manifests itself behind him. Sometimes I look back and dwell on what really happened to my cat. If he had lost one of his lives, he still had eight more to go, which I thought was a pretty good deal, because it meant that cat had, not exactly immortality, but a kind of extended mortality. Still, life is dangerous, and death finally grabbed his remaining lives.

Our kitchen clock plays a role to indicate that time is measured by mechanical motion. Anything that is set in motion soon finds itself at rest. I just have to wind up the clock to keep it going, but I could not do that with my cat, except in my art, where there is a doorway on the clock that repeats time, that brings me back to when my brother told me that my cat was run over by a truck. Now my cat has a kind of immortality to again enjoy his feline world of bird feasts and nocturnal assignations with the neighbor's tabby. But if I could see through my cat's eyes, I would also know his reality. (See Fig. 2. p 42, I think I going to make it?)

The Tainos

My identity search led me to the realization that Puerto Rican culture is a blend of Spanish, African, and *Taino* elements. *Taino* is the name for the indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico at the time of the Spanish conquest of the island. Early Puerto Rican colonial history was one of brutal warfare, where indigenous people were enslaved, persecuted, driven from their lands, and eventually replaced by African slaves. This conquest was particularly vicious. Actually, calling what the Spaniards did a conquest overlooks the genocide perpetrated upon a population of *Tainos* that, according to some historians, numbered between 20,000 to over 30,000 inhabitants when Columbus claimed Puerto Rico for God and Spain.¹⁰ Fifty years after Columbus's arrival, these indigenous people numbered less than 3,000 souls. Puerto Rico was to become a cauldron, where African, Indian, and Spanish DNA merged into a new ethnic identity, the *mulatto*.

In order to understand my art, one needs to understand the culture of the *mulatto*. Before the Spanish, Puerto Rico was called *Boriken*, its indigenous name. Archeology and history must work hand-in-hand to develop a comprehensive picture of pre-*Taino* Puerto Rico. Some time during the first millenium A.D., the *Igneris* people settled in the *Loíza* area on the northern coast of Puerto Rico. They were known for their pottery, which they decorated with beautiful, exotic designs. Their technique included finely polishing their vases and dishes and painting them to great effect. However, this tribe suffered the brutality of conquest, because a second wave of migratory warriors, the

Tainos, whether fleeing from other tribal disputes or in search of better lands, drove them off the island.¹¹ My family's displacement from Puerto Rico was only the latest in a series of diasporas.

Puerto Rico's last indigenous culture of the *Tainos* was a branch of the Arawak ethnic family. The *Tainos* were navigators of the first order. They had to be, traveling up from the coastal shores of northern South America to destinations in Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica, the Bahamian islands, and even into Florida. They refined their sailing skills by religiously observing the stars throughout their travels. While stargazing had its obvious uses in navigation, it also had a covert symbolic side which, incorporating with the moon and sun, spoke a secret language of destiny that could only be interpreted by shamans or village *Caciques* (chieftans).¹² It was this supremely honed skill that allowed the *Tainos* to travel confidently over the open ocean to spread their culture across the Caribbean. Their culture, as expressed in their pottery, art, and mythology, has never been acknowledged or appreciated for its exceptional artistry and complexity.¹³

Compared to the Aztecs and Incas, the *Tainos* come across as the poor cousins of the indigenous New World. They did not leave behind massive public temples, pyramids, ornate palaces, or great artifacts fashioned from precious gems, hummingbird feathers, and gold. The absence of gold is the most telling of all, because the Spanish came not for cultural enrichment, but for wealth. Despite a paucity of golden relics, they possessed a remarkable social and artistic culture, one that was later nearly erased, but has survived to the present in their legends, pottery, carvings, and in words like hammock, hurricane, and tobacco.¹⁴

Taino society reflected a complex structure of social classes. They were divided into three groups: the *naborias* (laborers), the *nitainos* (sub-chiefs), and noblemen, including the *bohiques* or priests and shamans, and the *Caciques* or chiefs. The Neolithic *Tainos*, with their cultural similarities with the other Mesoamerican neighbors, including the ceremonial ball game, ancestral worship, and a complex belief system of deities, had nothing in their experience that would have prepared them for the onslaught unleashed by the Spanish led by Ponce del León.¹⁵

Many Puerto Rican mainstream historians, such as Salvador Brau, depicted the *Tainos* as lazy and passive in two books. One is titled Puerto Rico and Its history 1884 and the other is titled the Colonization of Puerto Rico 1912¹⁶

In reality they were a dynamic people of conquest that ousted earlier inhabitants from Puerto Rico. *Taino* achievements included construction of ceremonial ballparks whose boundaries were marked by upright stone dolmens. Above all, they possessed a complicated religious cosmology, a hierarchy of deities who inhabited the sky, including *Yocahu*, the supreme creator, and *Jurakan*, the perpetually angry ruler of hurricanes and stormy weather.¹⁷

The *Tainos* worshipped their dead through personal gods called *Cemis* crafted primarily from stone, although wooden *Cemis* have also been found. The *Cemis*' function was to protect *Taino* families and their villages, much in the way that animal fetishes are thought to protect indigenous people in the southwestern United States.¹⁸ The *Cemi* is also used as an icon in my work. For example, the painting titled Colibri ("hummingbird" in English, Fig. 3. p. 43) has two *Cemis* placed below the hummingbird, representing for me a form of ancestor worship out of respect for the indigenous heritage within us in the Puerto Rican community. The view of the *casitas* appears through the

windows. As I stated before, the *casita* represents my communal identification with the Latino people and heritage, of which the *Taino* are one important constituent.

The ability to coexist with a potential rival was not in the Spanish character, not after centuries of warfare against the Moors, whom they had just expelled from their last Iberian stronghold in 1492. Spanish and *Taino* were now poised to meet in the earliest clash between indigenous people and Europeans, an encounter that resulted not only in the *Tainos*' loss of lands, but also in the demise of their identify as a people. However, current DNA research in Puerto Rico on the *Tainos* offers an interesting side issue, which is discussed briefly in the next section of my thesis.

The Spanish

On his second voyage, Christopher Columbus discovered the island of *Boriken*. He then renamed it *San Juan Bautista* and returned to Spain. It took the Spaniards several years before they committed resources to explore their new possession. In 1508, newly-appointed Spanish governor Juan Ponce de León led an expedition to settle first in present-day San Juan and then moved, when mosquitoes and diseases endangered his settlement, to Caparra around twenty miles inland.¹⁹

When the Spanish arrived in Puerto Rico, they were credited with possessing supernatural powers by many of the *Tainos*. Their ships and weapons, dogs and horses gave them unimaginable advantages on the killing fields of war; furthermore, even the *Taino's* sky-dominated mythology played against them by leaving them under the impression that the Spaniards had been transported by the very clouds across the ocean. Remarkably, relations between these two people were, at first, cordial. That changed when Ponce de León began to pressure respected *Caciques* for laborer to mine more gold.²⁰

Many mainstream Puerto Rican historians, including Ricardo Alegría, believed that the *Taino* gene pool did not survive the violence perpetrated against the group.

However, recent DNA studies in Puerto Rico indicate otherwise:

"Preliminary DNA studies -- the first of their kind -- conducted by the Biology Department at the University of Puerto Rico's Mayaguez campus -- tend to indicate that *Taino* (or at least Indo-American) mitochondrial DNA is more prevalent among certain populations on the island than previously believed."²¹

The presence of *Taino* mitochondrial DNA among present day Puerto Ricans is interesting, but it is a discussion beyond the scope of my thesis. Indisputable is their contribution to Puerto Rican culture and arts. *Colibri* honors these vanquished people whose memory remains vital and reinforced by the icon of the *casita*, which appears through the painting's window, establishing their eternal residence in my Latino community. (See Fig. 3. p 43, *Colibri*)

The African Diaspora

The search for gold, the struggle for colonial power, the subjection of the indigenous populations, and the missionary fervor for the evangelization of the native people all contributed to the hardships of the *Tainos*.²² In order for the Spanish to expedite their colonial objectives, they needed a labor force. Forcing *Tainos* and other native people to work in mines did not work: Too many died, too many fled, and besides, the Roman Catholic Church began to recognize indigenous people as being children of God. But in the Caribbean, nearly all the indigenous stock was replaced by African people who were brought there by the Spanish for their labor on the land.²³

It was well and good for the Pope and the Spanish priests to recognize the humanity of the various indigenous peoples, but who was left to do all of the hard work? What the Spanish needed was a labor force resilient enough to survive the rigors of slavery, the physical endurance to thrive in the tropics, and better yet, a people whom the Spanish wanted to believe were beasts of burden lacking the inconvenience of a spiritual soul. Many found their answer in Africa—precisely in non-Islamic, sub-Saharan black Africans.

Upon the solicitation of Charles V, king of the far-flung Spanish Empire, in 1537 Pope Paul III issued a papal bull entitled *Sublimis Deus*, which declared the natives encountered in the Americas to be rational beings with souls. It promulgated the protection of their lives and property under law, both in civil and ecclesiastical cases.

Slave traders turned the language of Paul III's bull on its head. The growing slave trade created its own linguistic word game for justifying black slavery. The Indians may have had souls, but Africans were more like untamed animals. In the Church's defense, it too issued bulls against the trading of blacks, but good intentions aside, black slaves soon poured into the colonial empires of the various European powers to replace the dwindling supply of available indigenous people. Puerto Rico became a society of mixed-race people. The mixing of black and indigenous populations may have occurred when a slave ran away into the mountains, where the Indian population was still intact. When King Fernando of Spain issued a decree that declared the freedom of the indigenous people, many slave owners may have deliberately mixed Blacks with indigenous slaves to loophole the decree by creating a population of mulattoes. The labor problem was thus solved, because mixed-blood *Tainos* could also be considered property.²⁴

This ethnic mixing went beyond the creation of a new gene pool. It resulted in the sharing of religion, food, culture, music, and the arts. A new kind of Catholicism emerged when Yoruba and *Taino* practices were disguised and transformed into new sets of deities and dualities of meanings. Especially in Puerto Rico, *Taino* mythology survived as it assumed strong African overtones.²⁵

The resolution of my different heritages into a coherent identity is the quest of my paintings *Borinqua*, Fig. 4. p. 43, and *Mano Poderosa*, Fig. 10 p. 49. In the latter, each personage refers to the four points of the universe. They are the Anglo-Saxon, Hispanic, African, and Indigenous points of the cultural compass that delimit my being. In the former, a *Vijigante* dancer, a traditional Puerto Rican folk figure used in the celebration of the feast day of St. James, wears a business suit, embodying a mix of cultural meanings from the past and the present in a new identity. It also represents in

iconographic form the transition from one culture to another. The *Vijigante* is riding a *paso fino* or show horse below a sea shell *Criollo* or Creole personage. Creoles represent one aspect of the richness of the Puerto Rican cultural mosaic, those who claim Spanish descent but are born in Puerto Rico. *El Criollo* is speaking about the *mestizo* or mixed-blooded character whom I depict as a typical Puerto Rican *Jibaro* farmer in a form of a fish-head person holding a hook.

This painting combines all of the cultural and genetic ingredients that inform my heritage. *El Criollo* is saying that the spirit of Puerto Rico lies not in the iconography of the Hispano - Moorish sentry box but in the *Tainos* who first inhabited the island of Borikén, also sometimes spelled Borinqua. The sun represents the angel who is commonly shown sustaining the Virgin of Guadalupe in Spanish colonial painting, summarizing my complete identity. The Virgin of Guadalupe is part of the Catholic religion brought to the New World by the Spanish, but she is believed to have manifested herself first on this earth to an Indian in the New World, and thus she symbolizes my own Pan-Americanization and assimilation of Western culture.

When my family moved to Puerto Rico in 1964, I had to obtain an English-language education, because I was not fluent in Spanish. Besides, my parents did not want me to lose my command of English. But their decision also placed me between the proverbial rock and a hard place, because when I made friends, I could only enter their lives on a superficial level. The crux of the problem was that they went to either public or private Spanish-language schools, so their cultural experiences differed with those I was learning. Music was a case in point.

I remembered a portrait I had made of construction paper of John Lennon, during the Beatles' psychedelic phase of the late 1960s, in art class. A Puerto Rico friend, who

might have been interested in the Beatles, would have more likely painted a concert scene featuring *El Gran Combo*, one of Puerto Rico's great *salsa* bands. Again, the image of the false chameleon comes to mind. I was a Puerto Rican, living on the island, but educated in English, painting non-Puerto Rican subjects. The anole lizard established the different ways I had to adapt to the new situation in Puerto Rico in which I found myself. For example, in my painting *Casa Cultura* (Fig. 5, p. 44), the building at its center references the English-language public and private schools I attended in Puerto Rico, surrounded by the false chameleons that characterized my existential predicament. These icons embody the struggle for my ethnic and cultural identity.

I qualified to be a member of the Puerto Rican Olympic Wrestling Team for the 1975 Pan American Games that were held in Mexico City. I was part of a delegation of athletes that lived in the Olympic Village that had originally been built for the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City and which now housed the competitors from all of the different Western Hemisphere nations for the Pan American Games. One day wrestlers Ralf Gonzales, Manny Liapol and I visited a Mexico City *barrio* called *La Laguna*. It was a marketplace for tourists to buy souvenirs. It was there that I first saw the work of the Mexican black felt painters. These lurid black felt paintings celebrated pre-Vegas Elvis and leaping tigers, but some also illustrated Mexican village life. It was interesting to see the contrast of the bright colors against the black background. They seemed to possess an energy that I could not identify. What was the source of this energy? It was a mystery to me that I had to explore. The experience served as a catalyst, because it was the first time that I started to think about colors. Eventually this quest led me to read The Art of Color by Johannes Itten in 1978.²⁶ I soon grasped how to control color by the degree of saturation. The technique I have developed harnesses this energy. Although

they are toned down, my colors still possess the energy I witnessed in Mexico City.

Unfortunately, I had to delay my exploration into color, because upon my return to Puerto Rico I found myself unemployed and technically a high school dropout because of my Olympic responsibilities. My father and mother were on the warpath about me finishing high school, yet I was not able to enroll at my old high school, so my brother, who was then a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, arranged for me to study for the General Equivalency Examination. I returned to the United States as a guest of my brother and his wife in their small apartment in Madison, Wisconsin.

Wisconsin

I had no high school diploma, but I was able to pass the examination and begin my college career. I did not know that I would be spending almost ten years in Madison, transferring from one institution to another. I spent the first two years in the Madison Area Technical College, studying commercial art without earning a degree. I then transferred to University of Wisconsin at Madison to continue my art studies. I was unable to focus my attention on my studies because I again got involved with wrestling. Leaving the university without a degree, I went on to finish my two-year commercial art degree in 1984.

Although I was learning my craft, I had the opportunity to meet Audrey Handler, a glass artist, who was organizing a Latino art exhibit at the Civic Center. I showed her my work, and she made a statement that puzzled me at the time. She told me that I drew from my head, and she described this as a gift that not every artist fully develops. I was invited by her to exhibit, which represented my first show. This prompted a period of self-examination when I started to think of myself as an artist, and one who had the talent to make a living at it.

Wisconsin also held other opportunities. I got to see Georgia O'Keeffe's work and Chuck Close's portraits at the Civic Center on State Street and at the Elvehjem Museum on the University of Wisconsin campus. Each had something for me to learn. O'Keeffe did paintings of New York City's landscapes while married to the

photographer Alfred Stieglitz. What attracted me to O'Keeffe was how she communicated her feelings in her paintings. I was a little put off by her urban landscapes. I thought she had made many of them appear gloomy. I assumed that she did not like the time she had spent in New York, but what I did not understand was, in fact, how she used color to strike a mood. O'Keeffe's use of palette is one of the true blessings of modern art. She employed colors as a way to transcend her subject matter. Her example also helped me to achieve the ability to draw "from my head" to achieve complexity through the use of color.

My other Wisconsin inspiration was the artist Chuck Close. Close specialized in portraits, not on the monumental scale of the French painter Jacques-Louis David, but instead a large canvas format of 9' x 7'. He did this for two reasons. First, he liked people, and, second, he found it interesting to paint their likeness as closely to nature as possible. While O'Keeffe achieved complexity through color and mood, Close achieved similar results with black and white. His portraits and self-portraits recall what the American Beat writer Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote about Francisco Goya in his poem "Coney Island of the Mind":

"In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see
the people of the world
exactly at the moment when they
first attained the title of
'suffering humanity.'"²⁷

Close's portraits from the 1970's are particularly effective. They were made to be seen both up close and from a distance. From up close, I can see the elements of art abstracted from the form, but from afar, I can see the elements blending together to form the whole. Later in the late 1970's, Close began to employ process color technique for

his paintings. Cyan, magenta, yellow, and black were the colors that created the super-realistic portraits he painted. Another inspiring aspect about Close was the feelings he invoked in these works. There is nothing sentimental or critical in them, but instead a sense that the artist wants the viewer to come to know these people.

Close's fascination with single image extends far beyond his ability to "figure out just how many ways there are to skin a cat." What does interest him is "plugging the same image through a variety of systems and seeing how it affects its looks.....seeing how subtle shifts in material, devices, and attitudes can make drastic differences in how the image is perceived."²⁸

These portraits, with their extraordinary details, became part of my memory that I explored in the painting titled The Mask Behind The Butterfly (Figs.1, p. 43 and 6, p. 46). In the center of this painting there is a portrait of Heaven Lashley. I have this brief infatuation with her and ask her out for dinner at a fancy restaurant. She talked about her mother and as she spoke I felt the imagery coming out in thoughts through words. So when I begin to paint, I drew upon an energy source from within. I drew her outline on the canvas, then filled it in with dots. This was done on the center of the canvas. The canvas was tilted at a 45 degree angle, lending it an unusual appearance. The multiple specific images that the viewer sees when standing close to the painting dissolve into the portrait as one moves away.

I chose to internalize this aspect of Chuck Close's work into my painting. It is possible to see things in more detail when one is close to my paintings, while from afar the invitation is to take in the whole visual affect unified into a larger image. In my linoleum prints, Runners I, Looking From Above, A Secret Place, and A Secret Place No More, I became interested in the effect of black and white in printmaking, techniques which later I employed in my pastel drawings and paintings. In order to be more

creative, I needed to react more to the image. I wanted to get more connected with my subconscious mind in creating imagery by painting my image freehand rather than in grid format, forming the dot patterns with brushes that were tailored for stippling in order to summon an image out of darkness. This gave me greater creative power over the design.

During this same period, I began to explore Africa's impact on Puerto Rican culture. The African influence in Puerto Rico is indisputable, but pondering the influence of Africa on Puerto Rico leads me to question if Africa also had an influence on Mesoamerica prior to the Spanish Conquest. With all the black influences in mind, it may be that African traders reached the shore of the New World and established colonies among the Olmecs around 1200 B.C., eventually spreading their influence, and possibly, their gene pool to other Mesoamerican civilizations. The evidence is provided by the Olmec colossal head sculptures which exhibit, according to some observers, African features.

Nubian traders reached the shore of the new world and became the rulers of the Olmec civilization in 1200 B.C. This would mean that the Olmec influence spread to Oaxaca, Teotihuacán, and the Maya was black in origin. The evidence is the Olmec colossal head that seems to have black features.²⁹

The African mask became an important icon in my work. To find African elements to incorporate into my work, I studied the mythology of the Yoruba culture. Although many of the African slaves in Puerto Rico came from eastern Africa, the west coast Yoruba culture became the dominant strain in the Caribbean through the preponderance of West African slaves.³⁰ The use of pastels seemed a natural medium to employ in my drawings of Yoruba carvings. I exhibited them in the Bazaar Gallery in

Madison around 1984. I still have some of the drawings from this exhibit. I grew interested in the mysterious effect that the mask brought to my drawings and prints.

Chicago

I left Madison in August 1988 and moved to Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb west of Chicago. Here I found a thriving arts community in the city's Chicano and Puerto Rican artists and organizations. When I left Wisconsin, I came to Chicago with two Associate Degrees. Although I did not have a job waiting for me there, my brother was kind enough to let me stay with his family, while I began the fourth transition of my life.

I became a member of the Oak Park Art League in 1991. The organization had a mix of serious and amateur artists. There were also monthly exhibits that I participated in, gaining much technical knowledge. At the time, I was focused on the use of pastels and linoleum prints. Although I did command a certain level of expertise in these media, I wanted to learn more about different materials, so I signed up for a monotype demonstration by the artist Sara Olsen Sklar, a printmaker with a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Michigan State University.

The workshop was useful, but even more helpful was the artist Ms. Sklar introduced to me. I would like to take a moment to analyze the significance of this introduction. Although I had begun to become aware of the richness of Latin American art, I was soon to become a colleague within an extraordinary network of Latino artists who were developing national names for themselves in the late 1980s. Sklar's introduction to the Mexican artist Nicolas De Jesús was a pivotal moment in my life. Here was another Latino printmaker who was working productively as an artist, but he was also working with a collective of other Latino artists in *El Taller Mexicano De*

Grabado (the Mexican Printmaking Shop) in Chicago's Pilsen community. Although *El Taller* was originally established as a Chicano organization, it soon welcomed other Latino artists into its fold, regardless of their ethnicity.

De Jesús was pivotal in helping me to establish contact with Rene F. Soliz, Carlos Cortez, Joel Rendón, and Héctor Duarte, three major Chicago Latino artists. These first introductions allowed me to become a member of the Mexican Printmaking Workshop. However, before this happened, I lost my job in drafting and then lost a position in circuit boards manufacturing due to a recession in the auto industry. Losing these jobs pushed me to devote the energy and determine to become a full-time artist. I realize now that it opened up opportunities both for work and education. I resolved to look for away to earn money while learning my craft. I took up frame making and stretcher building to provide myself with an income. Frame making and canvas stretching gave me enough for the food and shelter, the basics.

Around 1993, I met Santa Barraza, a Chicana feminist painter, who was on the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Whenever she needed stretchers, she came to me for help. She also showed me techniques and methods for making stretchers with a table saw. I made four of them for her. For one particular exhibition, she asked me to assemble four canvases. Out of curiosity, I stopped in to see the finished paintings. My art was still bound by the modernist and postmodernist aesthetics, but here before me were icons and symbols of the artist's Southwestern childhood such as a maguey cactus where a person was emerging from the plant's thorn, and directly below the cactus, the outline of boxes containing dots. When I ask her about this odd design, she replied that it was a page from one of the Aztec codices, where pages were folded accordion style and told the history of the Aztec empire. It was the first design that I had

encountered that was not based on Western aesthetics but on a pictorial narration of icons and numbers related to the Mesoamerican calendars.

Barraza spoke about how Mexican culture transformed the Aztec Earth Mother Goddess *Tonantzin* into the Virgin of *Guadalupe*, which she further metamorphosed into a form of Virgin *Tejana*. Barraza's image and explanation percolated in my mind over the next six months. I even dreamt about *Tonantzin/Virgin of Guadalupe* in a different guise. I saw Her as a jaguar stalking prey. Barraza became for me a *curandera* or folk healer in the way she talked about the *Popul Vuh* in Mayan literature. I was learning new things and ways of looking at the world, because there was a world just beyond this one that is mysterious and interesting, containing images that had universal power as expressed by the legend of Ollín, the four points of the Universe that permit the artist to bring heaven down to earth and inspire people.³¹

The Maya book of creation called the *Popul Vuh* recounts how the Hero Twins met the Daughter of the Underworld next to the Tree of Life. One of them was resurrected through a miracle of the Tree. I have represented the Tree in a sculpture and in a painting (Figs. 7 and 8 p46 & p47). The painting shows the Hero Twins playing ball and watching the mechanical horse as they play. One of them dwells in a building that stands for resurrection. The other waits his turn. They both approve of the mechanical horse.

This is an allegory of the Mexican-Americans that characterizes their current tastes by alluding to the mechanical horse, the Ford Mustang.

Barraza's art spoke volumes to me on how Latino art plays off of the idea of community as an identity, where the artist moves from the world of the neighborhood or

barrio into the steel and glass world of mainstream culture, then returns to the community and creates new worlds. I also noticed how I was seeing the world

differently, how billboards and signs suddenly possessed the light of the sun, moon, and stars; I like the early *Tainos* would look to the sky for answers.

Texas

Barraza and I decided to move in together, first in Pilsen, one of Chicago's Mexican communities, and later to Kingsville, Texas, after she had read her destiny in the cards. She obtained work first as an art consultant on a mural project, which eventually turned into a job offer to work at the University of Texas at San Antonio. We stayed at the Majestic Ranch facility in San Antonio, where the University owned an art studio. I was unemployed, but I used my time to work on my pastels on Black Arches Paper. San Antonio has a lively Latino art community. One of the artists we would visit was Sam Coronado, owner of Sam Coronado Studio in Austin, Texas, who was seeking artists to participate in special print exhibitions in 1995 and 1996. Barraza and I showed prints at those venues.

Influenced by the artists of Self-Help Graphics, I began to use more *Boricua* imagery. I also started to situate myself in the community I was living in, becoming more and more influenced by Barraza's mural at the University of Texas at San Antonio. It was like a moment of revelation. I was finally connecting images within a culture-specific context that helped me to break through the logjam that had stifled my creativity. I started to draw things straight from my head without too much rationalization. In 1996, for example, I completed a linoleum print titled Cabeza de Vaca en Chicago. I started the print in Chicago and completed it at Texas A&M University in Kingsville, Texas, (TAMUK), a kind of metaphoric journey that cleared away the mental restraints that had

impoverished my earlier work. I was now communicating with images, connecting concepts such as the origin of people and the unity of diverse cultures by employing a visual language of icons and symbols.

I later commemorated my transformative move to Texas and toward my full cultural identity in the painting Kingsville Connection, 2003 (Fig. 9, p. 48). It reiterates my imagery of the smaller jaguar ready to pounce on a butterfly, representing my creative process. The highways lead from the city of Chicago. They surround the larger cat or Olmec head in an allegorical sense. The sun and moon witness the activities of one of my TAMUK art professors, Richard Scherpereel. In this painting, I have one foot in Kingsville and one in Chicago. It combines the Chicago stockyard gate behind the giraffe building towering over them with the mighty General Cisneros, buried in bureaucratic soil in Kingsville. My transformation from Chicago to Kingsville, Texas inaugurated my new reality of restored cultural integrity.

In 1997 I enrolled as an art student at Texas A&M University at Kingsville. By my second semester I wanted to drop out. I wanted to paint on a black gesso canvas, like the artists I saw in Mexico, but with a nod to Chuck Close's use of color and patterns. Barraza would have none of this of juvenile attitude. I can still remember when she gave me that look, the one that said, "Too dark." She compelled me by the force of her logic to see black felt art as limited. She urged me to continue my studies, which I did, developing my own approach to painting through technique, color, and pattern. I experimented by first painting a scene with dots, not in George Seurat's sense of pointillism but Chuck Close's method of process color technique, contrasting this effect with stipples of white paint.

The first painting I did in this fashion was titled Casa de Corazón. Other pictures followed that explored the flexibility of my new method, including It's Only a Matter of Time. I continue to learn from Barraza by working on her mural projects, specifically, her Retablo painting, where I applied my airbrushing skills, gaining enough proficiency to teach others on the mural team. Air brushing has a flat-like quality that was used to great effect on Barraza's Retablo.

On a bus ride in Chicago, I read this line promoting literature's value in education: "The world is not only made of atoms, it is made up of stories." "I wrote this quote down many years ago, but I neglected to record the book it is from, whose title I now cannot recall." Every image created through my technique of dots and stipples possesses an iconic program behind it. Each of my dots and stipples represents an atom that makes up the totality of an image. Each image is a perception of a memory kept deep in my thoughts, and each image has a story.

As I stated previously, I started using more Puerto Rican imagery in my art. However, I still felt that I needed to connect with the larger Latino world, but I did not have a conceptual framework with which to articulate a response. I was still confronted by the following questions:

- How was I to merge Arawak and other Mesoamerican traditions in my art after living over forty years without any awareness of these traditions?
- Could I expand my Puerto Rican heritage with the addition of Latino consciousness?
- Which writer or artist could I analyze to help me synthesize the concerns and issues?

Octavio Paz's thoughts on indigenous culture, on Mesoamerica art, and on the Mexican people as he found them in the 1940s helped me to coalesce the thoughts I had

about my art. Paz portrays the Mexican reality as a mask that hides the weakness of the male persona, unable to transcend the agony that was unleashed during the time of the Conquest and that continued into the subsequent relationship between Mexico and the United States.³² My paintings reflect the pains of my life and convert them into allegories of visual imagery, not to hide, but instead to free the creativity of my spirit even when my world crumbles around me. Emotions are linked to an image by way of associated memories that narrate deep feelings in a visual language. When the right stimulus arises, emotions transmit the experience into something meaningful, either positive or negative. I feel that by painting images based on my life experience that they bring order to my perception of the world. This is the power that an image has on people.

As a Latino artist, I hold a vision of life where the gods witness the activities on earth for their own enjoyment. The sun, moon, and stars become spectators in a theatre, where characters play out the drama that parallels the realities of this world. My paintings and sculpture are, therefore, not based on a Newtonian definition of the universe, where the four directions conform to linear patterns of traditional thought, but on visual metaphors that form into allegories of imagery. Information and communications are making the world a smaller place to live, with advertisements and popular icons promoting commodities in markets just beyond the reach of consumers, who are caught in a trap of endless buying and selling. I counteract this banal reality through the alchemy of imagery and fantasy, which cover the four quadrants of the universe and develop a new wave of life. My art does this by taking the viewers away from everyday pain and setting their minds into a state of wonder. The methodology controlling this transformation includes the appropriation of emotions, symbols, animals, and influences.

Deep meditation on my images will reveal their underlying ugliness, their pain, transformed into things of beauty. Beheld casually, the beauty is still there, but its complexity is reduced to disparate images collected without reason. They lack the requisite nexus to communicate the emotions that I have invested in them to convey the ugliness and beauty of my world, in particular, and the ugliness and beauty of the world, in general.

Conclusion

My art has been built on a foundation of personal experiences: First, as a child in New York City and Puerto Rico, and second, as a man learning his craft in universities and workshops in Wisconsin, Illinois, Texas, and Mexico. I have covered miles in this journey, which I have categorized as a deductive process that shaped the personal "Me," while simultaneously creating a visual language of signs and symbols to transform my personal experiences into art. I have gone from living under mistaken ethnic and cultural assumptions to now living with an ethnic-specific identity based on my Puerto Rican ancestors coupled with the great Mesoamerican and African traditions that transformed me into a Latino artist. My life, therefore, is unimaginable without artistic creation, for it has forged my viable cultural personhood.

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Endnotes

¹ James D. Cockcroft, assisted by Jane Canning, "Introduction," Latino Visions: Contemporary Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American Artists (New York: Franklin Watts, 2000), p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, pp 8-9.

³ J.Eugene Grigsby Jr." Art & Ethnics Wm.C. Brown Company Publishers Dubuque, Iowa.1977 Pgs 93,110.

⁴ Notes from the graduate course Art 6352, Art History Seminar III: Topics in Latin American Art Prior to A.D. 1521, "Strategies for Understanding and Appreciating the Art and Architecture of Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica," Fall Semester 2002, The University of Texas – Pan American, taught by Dr. Richard E. Phillips.

⁵ Morales Carrión, Arturo Puerto Rico: A Political and Historical History. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983 P.288

⁶ H.D. Anthony Sir Isaac Newton. Abelard-Schuman London, New York, Toronto. 1960 P30.

⁷ Gilmore, John. Faces of the Caribbean :Latin American Bureau 1 anwell Street, London. P. 132. 2000

⁸ Morales Carrión,P. 321

⁹ "Anole, n. Any of numerous chiefly insectivorous iguanid lizards of the genus *Anolis*, of North, Central, and South America, that have the ability to change the color of their skin. [var. of *anoli* < Carib]." The Random House Dictionary of the English Language.

¹⁰ Williams, Byron, Puerto Rico :Commonwealth, State or Nation? Parents' Magazine Press, New York.1972

¹¹ Morales Carrión, P. 4

¹² According to The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, the word *cacique* originally meant a tribal chief, but later also came to mean a political boss or regional or local strong man. *Cacique* was originally a *Taino* word that the Spanish Encountered during their first conquest in the New World of the island of Hispaniola and that subsequently spread throughout the Spanish speaking world and even beyond.

- ¹³ Morales Carrión. P 5
- ¹⁴ Morales Carrión. P 6.
- ¹⁵ Morales Carrión., P6 .
- ¹⁶ Federico Ribes Tovar 100 Biografías de Puertorriqueños Ilustres Plus Ultra, Education Publisher, Inc. 1973
- ¹⁷ Morales Carrión, P. 4.
- ¹⁸ Morales Carrión, P. 5.
- ¹⁹ Morales Carrión, P 8
- ²⁰ Morales Carrión, p. 9
- ²¹ Melba Ferrer, "UPR Study Finds High Taino DNA Rate: Tests Contradict Theory of Extinction of P.R. Natives," San Juan Star, Sunday 18 April 1999.
- ²² Morales Carrión, p. 5.
- ²³ Amalia Mesa-Bains, Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 1993), p. 11.
- ²⁴ Haslip Viera, Gabriel: Taino Revival: critical perspective on Puerto Rican Identity and cultural politics/ Publication information: Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publication, 2001, *passim*.
- ²⁵ Mesa-Bains, p. 11.
- ²⁶ Johannes Itten, The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973).
- ²⁷ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "In Goya's Greatest Scenes," A Coney Island of the Mind (New York: New Directions Books, 1968), p. 9.
- ²⁸ Lisa Lyons and Robert Storr, Chuck Close (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p.92.
- ²⁹ Arlene Dávila, "Local/Diasporic Tainos: Towards a Cultural Politics of Memory, Reality, and Imagery," in Gabriel Haslip-Viera, ed., Taino Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 7.
- ³⁰ Mesa-Bains, Amalia. Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art. San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 1993.p11

³¹ Editor by Maria Herrera-Sobek Santa Barraza, Artist of the borderlands, Texas A& M University Press College Station. 2001. P 48.

³² Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude (Transl. Lysander Kemp; New York: Grove Press, 1961), *passim*. p34

VITA

Artist who is Born in Brooklyn, New York educated in Wisconsin and Texas is pleased to announce the opening of a new art exhibit titled "The Journey Home, iconography base on fantasy from the places he has been" by Benjamin P Varela, a Master of Arts candidate at the University of Texas-Pan American.

This exhibit opens Monday, January 13th in the Charles and Dorothy Clark Gallery in the Fine Arts Building at The University of Texas-Pan American and continues through Friday, February 4, 2005.

Benjamin P Varela is the creator of "The Journey Home" which took lifetime of imagery associated with events that has been transform into iconography. As a Latino, my art work is a vision of life in a form of fantasy where the moon, the sun, and the stars witness the activities on earth for their enjoyment. My artwork transforms imagery of the sun, moon, and stars into a theater where a stage of characters plays the dreams that parallels the realities of this world; perhaps a visual metaphor that forms and shapes into an allegorical iconography. I live in a world where information and communication are making the world a smaller place to live, with ads and popular icons that promote commodities in markets as well as legislative groups that pass bill to push the price of cost of living up. I counteract this by expanding the world with imagination in forms of paintings and sculptures. They are made up of alchemy of images that form a pattern with a purpose to open minds. When I look at these images, I can feel a mixture of identities flowing out of them into a visual. They cover the four quadrants of the universe, create a world a for others to dwell in and start a whole new wave of life given thoughts that contributes to the prosperity of human kind here on earth.

A reception with the Artist, Benjamin P Varela is scheduled for Friday evening, January 20th from 7:30-9:00 pm in the Clark Gallery.

Admission to all Exhibitions is free. The galleries are open Monday through Friday, except on university holidays. For more information or through special accommodations please call (956) 381-2655, email: galleries@panam.edu

List of figures



Fig. 1. Detail of The Mask Behind the Butterfly

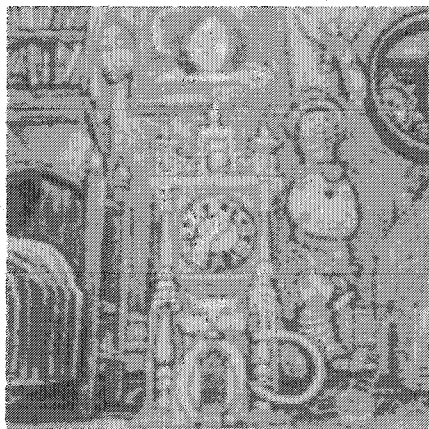


Fig. 2 I think I going to make it. acrylic painting, 12"x12" 2004



Fig. 3, *Colibrí*, acrylic painting, 4'x4', 2002



Fig.4. *Borinqua*, an acrylic painting, 48"x40", 2002.

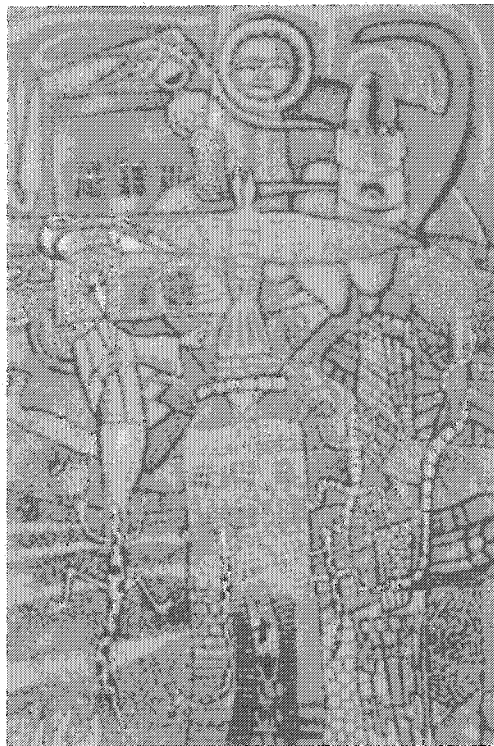


Fig.5. Casa Cultura, acrylic painting, 6'x4,' 2002

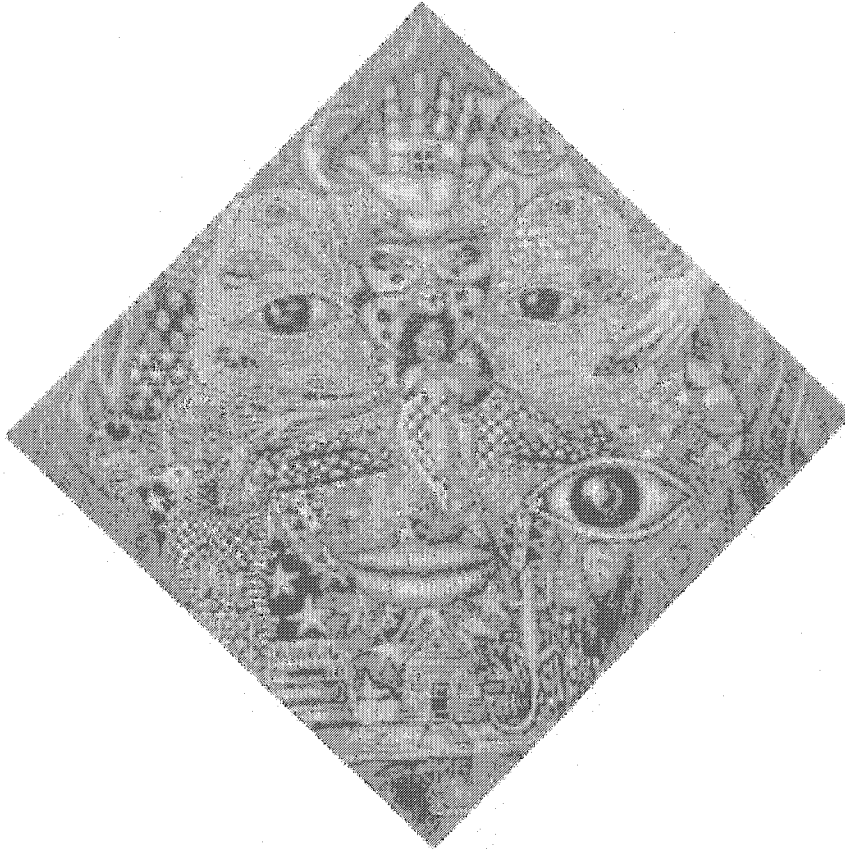


Fig. 6. The Mask Behind the Butterfly.
Acrylic painting, 2004. 5.75' x 5.75'.

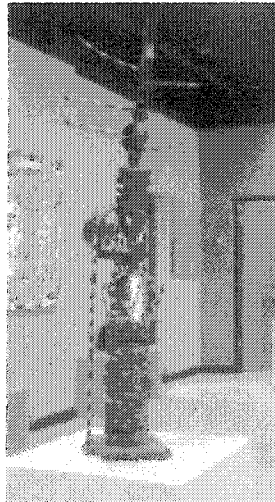


Fig. 7. The Tree of Life, painted metal sculpture. 34"x10"x10", 2003.

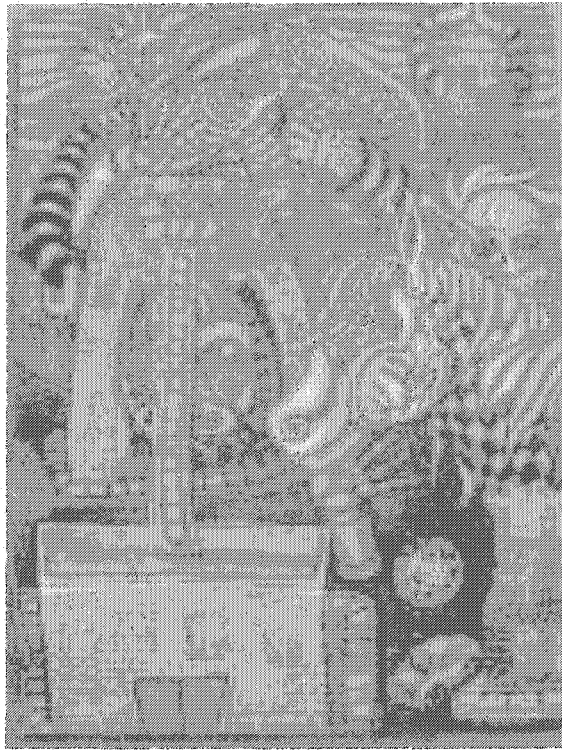


Fig. 8. The Hero Twins Encounter the mechanical horse, 2002. acrylic painting, 36"x48"



Fig.9, Kingsville Connection, Acrylic painting, 2003. 40"x60"

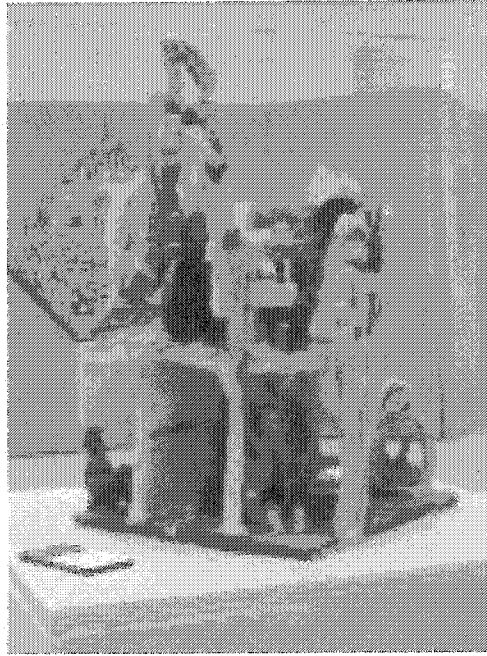


Fig. 10. Casita Amarilla, ceramic sculpture. 17"x11"x11" (This piece's central image represents a hut.)

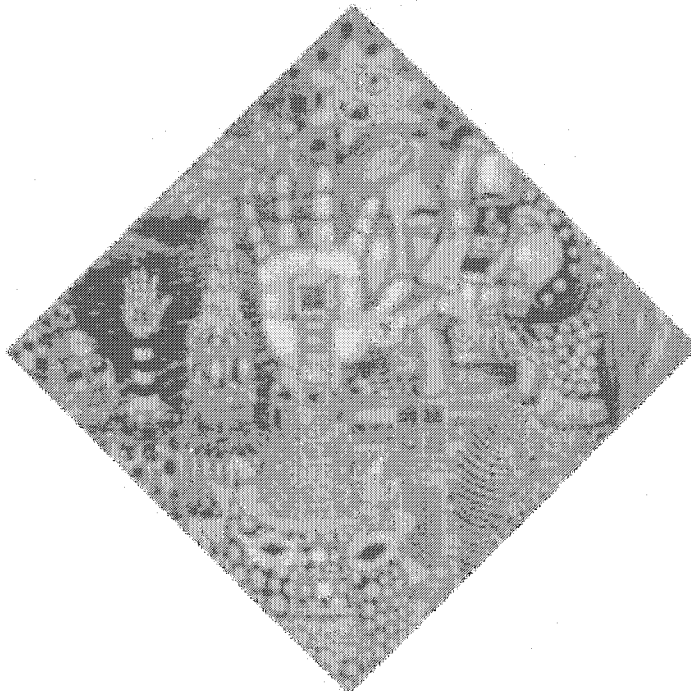


Fig. 10. Mono Poderoso, 2004. acrylic paint 4.75'x4.75'