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Robert Hobbs

The publication of José Luis González's *Puerto Rico: The Four Storeyed Country* in 1980 set off an intense debate about the nature of Puerto Rican culture. This collection of essays was initiated by questions the author's students were asking about the impact of American colonial intervention in Puerto Rico. González's response to these inquiries became an occasion to advance his theory about the African-Antillean population that he regarded as the true representatives of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. He attests that their natural development has been precluded for almost two centuries by several influxes of Europeans in the nineteenth century followed by the United States' hegemony beginning in 1898.

A Marxist and a nationalist, González views traditional Puerto Rican culture in terms of oppressor and oppressed. In his text he dispenses with the overriding myth of the *jibaro* - the rugged, independent white peasant of the central mountain areas - that was perpetuated by both nineteenth and twentieth century writers, following the model of Manuel Alonso's *El Jibaro*, a "Description of Customs in the Island of Puerto Rico" (published in 1843).

He asserts that the literary and artistic discourse on the *jibaro* as the essential representative of Puerto Rican culture is nothing but an ideology promulgated by a conservative elite intent on ignoring the real contributions made by a long-standing Afro-Mestizo population. One might extend González's argument by pointing out that the *jibaro* has been constructed on a European model as a nearly similar other close to the values of citizens from first Spain and then the United States. Regarding the Afro-Mestizo group as the first story and foundation of his heuristic edifice constituting Puerto Rico, González considers the second tier to consist of immigrants fleeing other Spanish colonies together with such foreigners as the English, French, Dutch, and Irish who responded when the colony was opened to immigration in 1815. This second level was completed at mid-century by a second wave of Corsicans, Majorcans, and Catalans who settled in the central mountainous regions of the island and developed large coffee plantations. Citizens of the

United States, representing an urban professional class, who began coming to the island at the turn of the century and who encouraged large-scale sugar cane production in the coastal regions, constituted the third story. The present fourth tier of this Puerto Rican house consists of a managerial class that developed as a result of Luis Muñoz Marín's economic policies that were first adopted in the 1940s.

Throughout his book, González argues that a true national character can only stem from a large base of blacks and mulattoes in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and cannot be imposed "from above" by a white minority. No longer can the native be viewed in terms of white Euro-American ideologies. As admirable as his search for an essential Puerto Rican identity may be, his study is compromised by a desire to rally the area's vast majority of mestizos to nationhood.

To dispense with almost two centuries of government by the second, third, and fourth stories in order to return to the ground floor of Afro-Mestizo culture might be appealing for its promise of freedom and cultural purity, but it does not take into consideration the subtle but important changes that have occurred as a result of centuries of first Spanish and then American control, as the critic Marta Traba admits in *The Rebellion of the Santos*:

A term obsessively repeated in Latin America, especially in Puerto Rico, is "identity." We are all searching for our identity, like a people culturally without a country, needing at all costs to find yellowed papers, lost or invented memories, hastily traced genealogies. The search for an identity is, fundamentally, the wish that our actions and words seem and sound truthful, truth being not an affirmation about objective realities, but rather a particular truth, ours, attractive enough to convince our own people, and others, of the way things are. In art, we want our forms to give pleasure, to be real, original, and distinct from those of other cultures. For a Columbian, to have Macondo (of One Hundred Years of Solitude) is more important than to put a satellite in orbit. We are stigmatized still by the Hispanic malediction: of

being, by obligation heirs to something: to some crown, some empire, some culture. And we have not been able nor will we ever be able to acquire that North American boldness which permits Gertrude Stein to say that the Americans are a happy people without parents and without children.

The question of Puerto Rico's essential nature is exacerbated by the way that the island at times functions as a nation, as when it participates in the Pan American games, and at other times is limited to colonial status because its constitution must not conflict with that of the United States. Frequently, Puerto Rico is left out of surveys of South and Central American art because it is part of the United States, but its culture is usually deemed Latino in the United States, and consequently it is excluded from U.S. histories.

González's *Puerto Rico: The Four Storeyed Country*, in conjunction with Traba's statement, serves as a useful introduction to the discourse on the nature of the self that is central to Arnaldo Roche-Rabell's art. Unlike these two scholars who search for the quintessential Puerto Rican, Roche recognizes that this geo-political self must be presented as a question rather than a solution because its character is dependent on one's perspective and situation.

An architectural student at the University of Puerto Rico from 1974-1978, Roche was concerned, as were many of his classmates, with the identification and preservation of the island's architectural monuments; several of his fellow students, in fact, have become instrumental in the rehabilitation of Old San Juan. As his art indicates, Roche was cognizant of ongoing debates about the nature and the value of Puerto Rican art and architecture, as well as ongoing debates about identity, including González's provocative hierarchical schema based on issues of color and country of origin.

A light-skinned mulatto, Roche reveals in his art that both personal and political identity can be slipping signifiers that can change with one's geographic location. Unlike González, he does not begin his search with a political agenda, instead he remains elusive and dependent on transactions between his connections with Puerto Rico and the United States and with his dual and contradictory insider roles as a colonial subject (a Puerto Rican) and a full-fledged citizen of an imperialist nation (the United States). In his art these geo-political affiliations are paralleled, as we shall see, by inner and outer perspectives (subjectivity

and seeming objectivity) stemming from the complexities of these reciprocal selves resulting in a negative dialectic that points to increasing contradictions without resolution. In addition, Roche works outside the major debates about Puerto Rico's possible future as a separate nation or a new state, without submitting to the usual third alternative of advocacy for its commonwealth status. In terms of his style, as opposed to his subject matter, Roche's expressionism is a late and original response to New York abstract expressionism that takes culturally sanctioned codes for individuality - spontaneous brushwork, pentimenti, layering of paint and images, direct and oblique references to the self, allusions to greater depths of being, and aspects of primitivism - and presents them as part of the problematics of attempting to essentialize and reify the self. Instead of directly refuting these strategies, he complicates them to underscore the inherent difficulties of unitary definitions.

Uninterested in turning art into a politically partisan tool and far too subtle to adopt unconditionally any proposed solution for Puerto Rico's future or merely to censure the United States' actions vis-à-vis the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Roche has taken an independent route in his art in which he looks at the nature of his associations with these two geographic entities and the post-colonial task of breaking down the binary opposition of imperial discourse that centers power and marginalizes the oppressed. According to the artist, the fate of the Commonwealth is no longer a moral question but one of survival. For every benefit, there is a drawback. While his family has traditionally been in favor of the Commonwealth, he would like for Puerto Ricans to examine all possibilities and to make a clear choice about their future. Its people need to weigh the pros and cons of limited autonomy against the advantages of citizenship and be mature enough to recognize exactly what types of compromises they are willing to make. His overall concern in his art has been to understand himself in terms of his relationships with both regions, particularly since he has inherited the role of representing the United States' hegemonic power while also assuming the position of a historically muted subject. Roche seeks in his art to free his colonial self from being simply construed as a monolithic other by representing its nature as dialogic, thus permitting him to allude to ensuing contradictions and ambivalences

about continued colonialism, statehood, and independence. His iconography is rich and complex, involving a commingling of investigations of the self and its many masks, as well as familial relations, biblical and mythological subjects, and the intricate and at times incestuous political relationships between the United States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Dependent on dreams, his images are predicated on intense belief even though they are subject to change. More closely attuned to magic realism than surrealism, these projections are an amalgamation of both rational and irrational world views. Unlike surrealism which privileges the unconscious, Roche's works incorporate autonomous and equally coherent codes for natural and supernatural realms that are in perpetual conflict. According to this artist, the realm of the spirit is as much a part of his reality as the everyday world. A follower of very specific internal directives communicated through dreams, Roche even moved to Chicago because "the big dream" told him to go to Illinois and study.

When Roche left San Juan to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979, the perspective of the North American Midwest, together with the racial discrimination and poor health that he experienced, forced him to confront the unreliability of his past definition of himself and to project new means for understanding himself. His search was catalyzed by the realization, occurring during his second year in Chicago, that his personality was largely a construct of chemical imbalances. While on a month-long school trip to Italy, Roche's professor and mentor Robert Loescher noted his mood swings and suggested that his aggressiveness might be the result of a glucose intolerance and not a personality trait. When tests confirmed Loescher's observation and showed Roche that his intense migraines and dizziness were the effect of severe allergies, he began to realize that he really did not know himself, and he started to wonder if other people's perceptions of him might help him gain greater understanding. At the time the question of reality versus persona that was being addressed by Cindy Sherman in photographs of the artist assuming a range of guises might have corroborated Roche's investigations.

In order to assess his persona, Roche decided to make a series of self-portraits in a photographic booth

so that he could record a variety of facial expressions. Over twenty of these images were then combined on one sheet that was replicated 50 times so that the artist could hand copies out to students and faculty at the Art Institute in order to ascertain which images would be elected the most representative. The sheets were given to a random sampling of individuals, including close friends, people who barely knew him, and total strangers. To his amazement most respondents did not regard him as the comic he would have predicted; instead the majority agreed that he was a serious and even sad person. Rather than considering these observations merely interesting responses, Roche believed them to be crucial to his survival as a human being and an artist. The first drawing to develop out of this experiment was ironically and somewhat self-defensively entitled *The Game I Never Lose*. Incorporating nine squares of his face in different guises, the work assumed the configuration of a tic-tac-toe game with the implication that the self is an open-ended construction that can change with luck and with the alternate perspectives of either considering oneself internally or contemplating oneself from the seemingly objective vantage point of someone else.

After making this work, Roche decided that he needed to focus on individual images so that he would have an opportunity to come to terms with a deeper sense of himself. His emphasis on his own visage has a precedent in the art of Robert Arneson which was often shown in Chicago in the 1980s. Roche continued working with photographs and began to rely on an opaque projector to replicate his photographed image on a sheet of paper. During a two-day period in 1981 he made four drawings of himself entitled *The Burning*, *The Spirit of the Flesh*, *Burning the Spirit of the Flesh*, and *Carving the Spirit of the Flesh* that he has informally termed "chemical reactions." Roche hoped that the dark space necessitated by the opaque projector would enable him to go beyond the constraints of his conscious mind and release a more profound image of himself.

At the time of these drawings he was looking at the works of the former Art Institute student Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, who gained public renown in the middle of this century for a painting, depicting in obsessive detail the decay and rot of Dorian Gray's features, that was revealed at the end of the Hollywood film based on Oscar Wilde's story. Albright's art had been the subject

of an exhibition at the Art Institute the year prior to Roche's arrival in Chicago, and his work was still being referred to among the faculty and students at the school. Roche was particularly fascinated with Albright's intense explorations of human frailty and physical decay, since art for Roche is also a means of understanding and an attempt to give some sense to human existence. Differing from Albright, however, he was willing to focus on himself with myopic intensity, to reorganize his visage, and even to eradicate prized features, if necessary, in order to come to terms with himself. During this time, he wrote a number of poems with such titles as "Gray" and "I don't want to die as an island" that relate to these images. Perhaps at this time he began to understand how he had colluded in subjecting his island self to the voiceless other by participating in the dominant ideology of United States citizenship.

His intense need to know himself is connected with a family tragedy that occurred in 1969. At that time Arnaldo's brother Felix began to suffer from bizarre delusions. The illness was upsetting to the entire family which had identified with his successes: the first born, Felix was an A+ student who had graduated after his junior year in high school in order to enroll in chemical engineering at the university, and a distinguished baseball player who had been chosen to carry the torch at the beginning of the Pan American games from his village of Vega Alta on the north side of Puerto Rico to the neighboring borough. The tragedy was not just the illness, it was also its impact: while suffering one of his bouts of incoherence, Felix shot and killed his sister Nancy. Arnaldo witnessed the incident which took place in an adjoining room, and he has since been haunted by his sister's shock and befuddlement at what was happening to her. The tragedy made headlines in the newspapers. At first Felix was put in prison. When he was later diagnosed a schizophrenic, he was hospitalized. Because schizophrenia is a complex psychobiological illness marked by periods of exacerbation and remission and because many people suffering from this illness are able to lead relatively normal lives, Felix was allowed to return home. He continued to suffer from acute bouts of delusional and incoherent thinking and would wander off in the country for weeks at a time. His sense of disorientation may have been aggravated by the family's move from Vega Alta to the city of San Juan where they found a small house close to the University of Puerto Rico. Within a few years after the shooting, Felix was found dead.

The family tragedy involving the death of Arnaldo's two siblings made him wonder if his chemical imbalances and resulting mood swings might have anything to do with his brother's illness. But a dream soon after the murder helped to alleviate some of his fears. In this dream a devil or demon appeared in the guise of Felix. In response to the question of why he was being approached, this figure said in a surprised voice, "Don't you know that you have been called to be a prophet?" Over the years Roche has returned to the theme of his brother who has become a symbol for the problems of Puerto Rico - and Roche has found in his art a metaphoric way of becoming his brother's keeper. But keeping his brother means more than resurrecting an image of him, because each new incarnation that either points to Felix directly or obliquely suggests his presence through his brother Arnaldo also emphasizes his absence and affirms the work's role as a lingering trace of the brother it cannot resurrect and the disaffected and schizophrenic cultural situation many Puerto Ricans try to ignore.

Deeply upset about the tragedy, the artist has emphasized his remorse about not being able to prevent it. To relieve his frustration, he decided that he must live with great intensity, to be as positive as possible, and to use his art as a tool for dissecting and understanding life while hopefully defeating death in the process. He has compared both his life and his art to the stereo in his car in which the bass, middle range, and treble are turned to their highest possible volume. Instead of wanting to explore a range that extends from the calm to the acute, Roche is interested in intensifying feelings. Consequently, he does not work with minimalist forms, and courts being too painterly, too decorative, and too passionate in his work. He equates art with the life force, which he insists on raising to the highest possible decibel.

Roche is a driven artist, not a hedonist. His aim is to affirm life and to understand his relationship to it. He believes himself to be a prophet capable of providing answers for others as well as for himself. His search has been for selfhood and for a lost brother who in many respects is an integral part of himself. For this reason, his self-portraits are not only explorations of Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, they are also attempts to discern threads that connect him with others. He, himself, and members of his family, particularly his brother, his father, and his mother, can be considered as performers in a repertory company

who play a number of significant roles in his ongoing narratives. After his first series of self-portraits in 1981, Roche continued working in the same vein for a year and a half. In the process, he admits to succumbing to narcissism even though he would frequently undermine his ego in order to achieve a greater range of references. But even more important than these slips into narcissism, which were self-censored by comparing himself to a peacock in *Secular Hunter* (1982), are the ways that Roche began to create slightly doubled versions of himself - oblique views that can be conceptualized as a series of off-register tracings that present competing definitions of himself, which do not coincide with his overall creative role. Thus his body and head have become cultural signifiers that go far beyond the egotistic and idiosyncratic to enact the geo-political dualities and consequent advantages and indignities that Roche and all Puerto Ricans are forced to suffer.

This need to expand his range may be considered a natural consequence of his art historical studies at the Art Institute of Chicago. While he was a student there, Roche had the opportunity to take a number of art history courses with Robert Loescher, including proto-Renaissance art, Renaissance art, baroque art, Latin American art, and one entitled "Visionaries and Eccentrics." In addition, he was able to enroll in courses taught by curators of the Field Museum, on African art and on witchcraft, magic, and sorcerers. These seven courses provided Roche with a wealth of established iconography and cemented his connections with the art and culture available to him in Puerto Rico, particularly the Renaissance and baroque art at the Ponce Museum.

When one of his professors at the Art Institute pointed out that his painted images of his face were like topographical maps, Arnaldo began to speculate about the expressive potentials of other body parts: a back, he conjectured, might be as evocative as a face if handled properly. He began a number of studies of bare backs in public parks and found upper torsos in front of ponds and lakes particularly intriguing. Shortly before receiving his Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1984, while on a return trip to Puerto Rico, Roche was using a friend as a model. Inspired by light striking his friend's back, Roche decided to place a sheet of paper directly on top of it and to trace its conformation, letting the volume of his friend's physique appear to rise

out of the paper itself. For him, drawing directly on the back was akin to dissecting it. He has often used such terms as "cutting" and "incisions" to describe this process - terms that take on violent connotations even though the artist is comparing his act with a surgeon's. Roche wanted not only to make literal contact with another individual through his art but somehow to penetrate it so that its life force would participate in the vitality of his drawing, becoming a second skin, so to speak. He remembers being excited about breaking rules of both drawing and painting so that he could make art a means of confronting life. Soon after completing this work, he began to employ a variety of Japanese papers, including rice paper and materials incorporating raw or natural substances; later he moved from paper to canvas. His "cloakings" or "cocoon," as he has called these pieces, relate to the contemporaneous experiments of his classmates who were casting handmade paper. Although Roche believes that this technique permits him to come to terms with life, one could argue that his paintings memorialize the missing bodies of the models that he sought to discover. The canvas covering them is capable of disclosing and enclosing images, as well as closing them off from viewers, and the resultant images that reveal and also shroud these figures make them seem attainable as illusions while excluding their separate identities from the completed works of art. One could say that Roche's art is a telling trace: a profound set of absences capable of signaling both the absences and presences of his models to his viewers. And this oxymoron dramatizes a similar presence/absence that occurs in the actual viewer of Roche's art when his/her position in front of it is alternately acknowledged and denied.

Roche's series of life-sized figures can be connected with several prints that he made of his mother before going to Chicago. These impressions were influenced by the teaching techniques of Felix Bonilla Norat who conducted a month-long summer course that Roche audited at the University of Puerto Rico in 1974 prior to entering architecture school. Norat challenged students to find themselves through their art by becoming "tigers" rather than "bunnies" and by becoming involved in ideas that might extend back as far as cave painting when Cro-Magnons left handprints on cave walls or be as recent as Yves Klein's prints of nude models coated with blue paint that were called "Anthropometrics."

Reminding students that artists in the past have found inspiration in the human body, as well as in landscape, religion, and even political situations, Norat encouraged them to consider art in new ways. Almost immediately, Roche began to make impressions of his hands, buttocks, and penis. He also asked his mother to become a master plate for a monotype. Wearing only a thin house dress and with her long hair hanging in tresses, Maria allowed her son first to cover her body with acrylic colors and then to print it. The artist remembers using one color at a time in order to print different parts of her body. The result was extraordinary for Roche since it permitted him to work with human scale and at the same time enrich his semiotic stockpile by adding indexicality (actual existential relations) to more traditional icons (resemblances) and culturally sanctioned symbols.

Roche's interest in human scale may be attributable to the impact made by Norat's brief course, but a more probable source is the extraordinary collection of baroque paintings in The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc. housed in the Museo de Arte de Ponce. Termed the foremost collection of Italian baroque paintings in the Western Hemisphere by the eminent Rubens scholar Julius S. Held, the Ferré Foundation also contains important works by Spanish artists who participated in the Counter-Reformation by invoking the grand and sacred theater of daily life through the use of dramatic lighting and human scale. This pervasive ideology also affected a number of the seventeenth-century Dutch painters in the collection. At age 17 Roche had been so deeply moved by the heroic scale of Pieter Gerritsz Van Roestraeten's *Vanitas - Still Life* (c. 1630 Haarlem - London 1700) that he went home and made a similar life-size winged angel. The idea of art as a religious and committed act projected in this collection through its strengths in Counter-Reformation imagery, baroque art, and Pre-Raphaelite painting have been of great consequence to Roche, who has consistently approached painting as an elevated discourse capable of dealing with the most profound issues concerning the body and the spirit.

In addition to its paintings, the museum's collection of carved wood and polychromed Puerto Rican santos, which are widely accepted as one of the island's major cultural contributions, has had an effect on Roche's work since he was brought up in the Catholic Church until

both he and his mother converted to Protestantism after Nancy's death. Marta Traba has estimated that 10,000 of these small figures have been made in the past two centuries. Sometimes santos were painted at the same time as their owners' houses and in the same colors so that some figures have accumulated as many as six or seven layers of paint. To achieve a semblance of the original appearance of these objects, collectors and dealers have scratched through accrued layers of paint to reveal remnants of the first one. The effects of these layers together with the distressed qualities attained through the scratching, incising, and rubbing of them have had a major impact on Roche's way of working. When he went to Chicago and became familiar with important examples of El Greco's work at the Art Institute, Roche found that the flickering light manifesting the spirituality of these figures is analogous to the stippled surfaces of many old santos.

These simple folk pieces in tandem with the art of the former Chicagoan Leon Golub may have encouraged Roche's experimentation with distressing and reworking the surfaces of his own paintings. Many of Golub's pieces, in fact, are similar to Roche's self-portraits of the early 1980s in terms of their eroded surfaces attained through the liberal use of lacquer solvents coupled with radical reworking as is evidenced by his *Burnt Man* (1960). According to Golub,

My methods are reminiscent of carving techniques, the removal and chipping away or carving out of surfaces, rebuilding (repainting) and then carving into the surfaces again. This effect is achieved by heavy overlays of paint which are then reduced by solvents, carved by sculpture tools. What remains is a 'sculptural' image, ravaged and eroded but still retaining its essential existential structure.

Roche's technique of working on canvas evolved into a complex matrix incorporating aspects of drawing, painting, and printmaking. Some of his techniques, as we shall see, connect him with Puerto Rican traditions, while others assume metaphoric, and one might even say sacramental overtones. He remembers having a dream at the time that he was first evolving this approach. To his question, "What is drawing?" he received the answer, "Drawing doesn't exist. Drawing is between painting and printmaking." Over the years he has developed a system of first painting a canvas with three or four layers of color, beginning usually with yellow, followed by a coat of

either red or orange, then black and sometimes white, before reworking these surfaces through a range of printing techniques.

One of these techniques he calls "imprinting," which consists of a series of rubbings of specific objects, including human figures, placed beneath the canvas. Although he may have been presented in one of his classes with Max Ernst's surrealist technique of frottage, he remembers being upset when he learned that this German artist had made a rubbing of an actual cat. Roche has emphasized the importance of not seeing the objects placed beneath his canvas while he is working so that "I have to find them through art." In the early 1980s he considered the canvas a "container of life," and he hoped to approximate as much as possible the full volumetric proportions of his models' figures even if he had to extend their proportions laterally. Seeing works by the Colombian Fernando Botero that were on view before his departure for Chicago may have given him permission to focus on rotund forms even though the largesse of his figures, signifying vulnerable human vessels, conveys a vastly different meaning than Botero's work.

If his completed figures appear to be distorted as they often are, their deformations are signs of the frailty of the human condition - an attitude consistent with the artist's stated desire to love, accept, and reclaim the other that is represented by his model. On a number of occasions he has stressed that this other is a hybrid incorporating aspects of himself, particularly his desire to redeem his brother. This hybridity is an important strategy for fending off clichéd definitions of his two geo-political roles by keeping both alternatives open and unresolved. Considering his fascination with the art of Michelangelo, one might project the idea that the figures in his canvases have less to do with this Italian master's sculpture and more in common with his portrait of himself in the form of the flayed skin of Saint Bartholomew in the *Last Judgment*. In this case Roche's equation "background = battleground" and his intense scratching or digging through layers of dry or partially dried paint with the concentration of an archaeologist to reveal glimmers of an inner light is apposite. Although he conceives of this second skin as a battleground where the artist must be the victor, Roche is also aware of its extreme delicacy.

On a number of occasions he has pointed to his great need to reach out and touch someone through his

art - a need that was literalized by the technique of tracing bodies of friends and family members hidden beneath canvas. In the beginning Roche believed he was honoring his models when he incarnated them in his art. But when they began to demand payment for this honor, he became disenchanted and made *The Loss of Innocence* (1988) as a way of dealing with his mixed feelings. In this work he joins rubbings of a heart-shaped Venetian glass frame with those of a guitar to emphasize his role of reflecting reality and playing with the human body as if it were a musical instrument akin to the guitars in Picasso's cubist paintings. His two pairs of eyes, signaling one head encased within another, might be considered a statement about a wiser and less idealistic view of his role as an artist, perhaps serving as an ambivalent image of increased or diminished self-importance. But the title, *The Loss of Innocence*, can also indicate an awareness of the artist's dual nature and the difficulty of suturing his enlarged head to his model's body because such an act colonizes this body, transforming it into a tool for reenacting, ritualizing, and legitimizing the master narrative of imperialism whereby an author-anthropologist or his or her colonial designee concocts the other. The absurdity of Roche's hybrid image, however, exonerates him from accusations of merely acting as the master power's agent because he reinscribes a new script that parodies through doubling the purported legitimacy of the old one.

When Roche first began to wrap figures with canvas, he remembers feeling a little like the earth artist Christo even though Roche differs from Christo in wrapping forms in order to evoke their inner truth. After his move to Chicago, Roche began to use oil paint exclusively. This medium that necessitates a much longer drying time is admirably suited to working with stratified colors as if they were layers of clay that can be carved. In the process of making these incisive drawings and rubbings, Roche has to remove the prepared canvas, with its several layers of color, from its stretchers so that it can be wrapped around a figure or used to cover a series of objects. In the course of creating a work, he will often restretch a canvas several times. If certain sections are deemed unacceptable, he will then scrape down the entire area and begin anew. Because the process of stretching and restretching the canvases is laborious, Roche began to employ assistants to help him with this



Lucas Cranach, the elder, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., Puerto Rico

part of his method. Over the years he has experimented with applying layers of thin pigment, which dries quickly, over heavy paint, which remains wet, in order to achieve a texture of cracks. Also he has found a way to brush wet layers over dry paint in order to create wrinkled effects.

The yellow/red colors that he began uncovering have assumed a meaningful spiritual and psychological dimension for the artist who views their appearance as memory traces of the blood that issued from the gunshot wounds disfiguring his dying sister's pale skin. Besides being memorials to this tragedy, they also sublimate it into a transfiguring interior light. In addition to coming to terms with this horrible event through art, Roche has incurred several important iconographic and stylistic debts. One is a loose connection with the images

of *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* displaying his wounds. This subject is represented in the Ponce Museum by a superb Lucas Cranach the elder painting. This comparison with Christ's image can be taken a step further by pointing out that Roche's painterly illusions are rubbings of actual people which reenact the Christian mythos of incarnating the divine within the limits of the human. Although the powerful *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* by Cranach might be a source for Roche's work, structurally and iconographically the tradition of Veronica's Veil is also significant. A veil of revelation and an image of resurrection that occurs frequently in Latin American art, Veronica's Veil is a spiritual model for the almost magical apparition of the model as a painted and drawn image in Roche's completed paintings. A possible source for Roche's revelations of inner light is the tradition of frequently dressing devotional figures of the Madonna in richly worked, gold-embroidered garments. These garments reappear in such traditional Latin American paintings as *The Virgin of Candlemas* (c. 1700) in Ponce.

At first Roche imprinted figures in their entirety, either with or without heads, but soon he began to couple them with his own head derived from photographs, and he also incorporated at times tourist pictures of San Juan and Chicago. Both types of photographic images were transferred to the canvas through the use of an opaque projector, which had become a reputable artistic tool due to its widespread adoption in the late 1960s by photo-realists. For Roche the process of using an opaque projector is highly symbolic, since he uses projected light to create paintings in otherwise dark rooms. The process thus takes on the poetic, biblical overtone of bringing light out of darkness.

In addition to imprinting, Roche has relied on the technique of monotypes in which he paints directly on a range of materials, including leaves and lace, before applying them to the surface of the canvas where he affixes their colors with rollers before gently prying them loose. In the early 1980s Roche began simulating such textures as lace by stamping impressions of the fabric onto a gessoed surface with a hammer. But he later found that using fabric for monotypes would enable him to create richer surfaces and more accurate textures through a far less combative means.

His monotypes of both real and simulated lace in thread, plastic, and paper enable him to refer to an



South American School, *The Virgin of Candlemas*, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., Puerto Rico

enduring cottage industry in Puerto Rico that goes back to the sixteenth century when both colonizers and the native population known for their excellent weaving helped to meet the growing European demand for this costly material. After World War I this craft, which was practiced in homes by women and girls as young as six and seven, was increased to meet the demand of merchants in the United States who were looking for ways to replace continental supplies. And after a hiatus during World War II and its aftermath when needlework was industrialized and cottage industries were banned on the island, bobbin lace making was revived in the 1960s and 1970s under the auspices of the Institute of Puerto Rican Studies. In his work, Roche avoids designs made for tourists and export such as images of country homes, landscapes, and figures playing musical instruments, and chooses more typical patterns intended for domestic

use, including repetitive fruit and floral motifs. In addition to serving as a cipher of Puerto Rico, lace making has a source in Ivan Le Lorraine Albright's paintings where it bespeaks an outworn, polite, bourgeois tradition of elaborate antimacassars and table scarves.

When he prints vegetation, Roche will often create dozens of small monotypes throughout a work. Over a several day period he may make a number of prints of the same leaf, for example, to achieve a range of intensities that vary from the vividness of first impressions to an almost ghostlike fragility occurring in later ones.

When he prints directly on the canvas as well as when he uses this surface as a record of his rubbings and drawings of the figures and objects placed beneath it, Roche reconceives the surface of his work to be a metaphysical integument capable of registering impressions from outside as well as from within it. No longer the two-dimensional picture plane extolled by modernists, Roche's painted, printed, and imprinted surface is the artistic equivalent of an old document that has been the recipient of a range of marks and impressions. Metaphorically it functions as a metamorphosing cocoon that is alternately full and void as one contemplates the presences and absences constituting this art.

Roche's incorporation of printmaking techniques in his paintings alludes to the Generation of 1950 which participated in heated debates regarding Puerto Rico's possible future as either a nation or a commonwealth with limited autonomy. Members of this group favored linoleum block prints because they believed that this medium would directly reach the Puerto Rican people whom they considered an ideal audience and also an important subject for this art since they continued to be exploited. Consisting of artists trained locally and abroad, this group created the Center for Puerto Rican Art (CAP) in 1950 which combined the functions of collective workshop, propaganda center, and gallery space. In 1951 the group's first published portfolio of prints was significantly entitled *La Estampa Puertorriqueña* (The Puerto Rican Print) to underscore the artists' nationalistic bias. Among the prominent members of this group are Rafael Tufiño and Antonio Maldonado who were both familiar with the Mexican Taller de Gráfica Popular since they had studied in Mexico.

The social protest prints of this generation established a high standard that was perpetuated by members of

the Generation of 1960 who emphasized silk-screen posters and woodcuts in addition to linocuts. Because several members of the Generation of 1960 participated in such international exhibitions as the Tokyo and Ljubljana biennials, the initiation in 1970 of the San Juan Biennials of Latin American graphics, which have continued to the present day, seemed a logical next step. Arnaldo Roche remembers attending two of these exhibitions in the 1970s. These biennials impressed him, as they have many other Puerto Rican artists, with the idea that print-making is firmly grounded in Latin America, that it is an eminently democratic art, and that it constitutes an area of experimentation closely connected with the modern movement in Puerto Rico. Both the Generations of 1950 and 1960 have provided Roche with a graphic tradition that he accepts even as he subsumes it under the aegis of painting. In the 1970s he took a class on woodcuts with Antonio Torres Martino who encouraged him to make monotypes. And Roche has tended to prefer monotypes because they are an additive process relatable to painting rather than the subtractive process of linoleum blocks. Because monotypes have not been popular in Puerto Rico, Roche's liberal use of this technique can allude to the Commonwealth's grand print tradition while safeguarding the uniqueness of his art. In his work this tradition functions as an acculturated sign connoting Puerto Rico. This connection with Puerto Rico extends to his works on paper in which he scrapes through the layers of either lithography or woodblock ink that he uses in lieu of the oil paint employed for his canvases.

In addition to alluding to Puerto Rican cultural practices such as lace making and printing in his art, Roche's self-portrait serves as a surrogate for this culture. In *Take Over* (1985), for example, he presents a shadowy figure in the process of abducting a decapitated head of himself. In Roche's art decapitation often signifies St. John the Baptist, the patron of San Juan and a symbol of Puerto Rico which is separated from both the United States and neighboring Latin countries, making it the equivalent of a head cut off from the body. In a number of the artist's early works an image of his head on a tray reinforces this relationship. Roche has stated that *Take Over* manifests "the idea of falling in love - take my attention, take my mind!" And he has suggested that the dry straw constituting the background and his head,

which may signify his brain and consciousness, resembles the residue of the sugar cane that is regularly burned off after each harvest, thus ensuring the work's connections with Puerto Rico.

Roche uses his head as a screen on which to project Puerto Rican concerns and a site on which to enact a discourse of political and cultural hegemony and resistance to it. In *Take Over* he implies that a shadowy African-Antillean is stealing his *jibaro* self, and in *Asabache* (1986) he presents a transactional - and not a transcultural - Roche who incorporates overall Negroid features with Caucasian blue eyes. This self is transactional because it represents an attempt to negotiate a new identity, no matter how difficult or even impossible such a hybridization might be. Transactions based on essential differences can be differentiated from transcultural operations. The latter privileges the hegemony of dominant western powers and the muted voices of natives when it considers dissimilar cultures to be equivalent and thus assumes easy passages between separate domains. Contrasting with transcultural operations, transactions are enacted between distinctly different entities, with the proviso that the lesser culture is able to resist the imperialistic plundering of a greater power, while transcultural passages occur under imperialism or between equals. The first is a post-colonial operation, while the latter maintains the hegemony of imperialism and the ideology of international styles based on the proclivities of the dominant powers.

Named *Asabache* because of the striking resemblance of the figure's ebony skin to a black pearl, this imposing head of Roche, reconfigured as a much darker person, is notable for his penetrating, yet wary blue eyes. Despite Roche's idolization of Luis Muñoz Marín, the island's first popularly elected governor and the head of the Popular Democratic Party that sought in the 1940s to improve the conditions of the underclass, particularly the *jibaro* of the mountainous interior region - he has even made several paintings of this great man - this artist does not subscribe to Marín's belief in the *jibaro* as the quintessential islander. *Asabache* represents Roche's return to the problem of the Commonwealth's inherent character in a series of self-portraits that communicate the need for a new type of transactional self capable of signifying fluctuating U.S./Puerto Rican relations. In place of the white mountaineer, Roche presents himself in the guise of African-Antillean figures from the coastal regions.

Asabache presents the type of subtle and complex racial relations occurring in Puerto Rico that were analyzed by Melvin M. Tumin and Arnold Feldman in their classic study "Social Class and Skin Color in Puerto Rico," first published in 1961. Finding that discriminatory practices on the island differ from those of the United States because of the former area's demographic breakdown of 55 per cent whites, 40 per cent mulattoes, and five per cent blacks, the authors note that while "White may not be the nomenclature always preferred. Negro is quite clearly not preferred." Even though people of color are not overtly discriminated against in Puerto Rico and mulattoes seem to be the preferred racial type, the study revealed that whites were in general better educated and had more opportunities for advancement. Although changes in attitude have certainly occurred in the intervening decades, Roche's blue-eyed black figure indicates the hegemony of the Anglo position, with its underlying imperative to see the world through Euro-American azure-colored eyes. Instead of subscribing to González's thesis about an incipient African-Antillean Puerto Rican identity outlined at the beginning of this study, *Asabache* appears to take an ironic view of a colonial who is also a citizen of a First World nation.

On a personal level the artist was made painfully aware of the social importance of French bloodlines by members of his father's family from Ponce who took an inordinate pride in their fair skin and blue eyes and tended to look down on the mulatto background of his mother. His theme also has affinities with Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (published in 1970) which presents the story of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, a black girl who prays for her eyes to turn blue so that she will be as beautiful as the blonde children she holds in high esteem, and like them be important too. Although Roche claims never to have read this story - and there is no reason to disbelieve him - his painting and Morrison's tale are concerned with the presences and absences and with the eroded sense of self worth that have afflicted people of color in the past when the dominant ideologies have supported an Anglo position. Instead of positing an actual identity, *Asabache* can be considered a case of nonidentity, a situation in which the irresolvable dialectics between blackness and whiteness, as the artist has postulated them, evoke fundamental disjunctions between his concept and the absence of a specific

reference in the real world.

The theme of *Asabache* is sustained in *Poor Devil* (1988) that presents the artist as a Negroid mythological Pan who peers through bushes with his blue eyes. Not only a conflation of black and white, this figure could be a conjoining of the artist and his brother who appeared to him as a devil in the dream cited earlier. Roche views this figure's horns as equivalent to rays of light - a traditional sign of wisdom resulting from a mistranslation of the Hebraic text about Moses and a misunderstanding basic to Michelangelo's characterization of this biblical figure. This metaphorical allusion to wisdom accrues additional Old Testament connotations when one considers that the figure's skin tones resemble burning embers and that his spirit is being annealed and purified in the process. The artist has also referred to the figure's power by calling him "poor mulatto devil" who may be demeaned but who is not subjugated. Roche's reading underscores the figure's apparent acquiescence to the colonial narrative's demands to conform. But the absurdity of the blue eyes on this figure restates, transforms, and undermines the colonizer's script through the parodic device of doubling.

In *Let Me In* (also 1987) Roche invokes the force of his mother Maria, whom he equates with the lush vegetation of Puerto Rico. Together they create the forceful hybrid of *Let Me In*. With Maria perched on his head, Arnaldo demands that the gate between Puerto Rico and the United States be open to them. Roche admits, however, that an alliance with his mother and her connection with Puerto Rico might not be positive and might even overwhelm him. At times, he wonders if he is capable of having a separate identity. In *For the Record: The Eleventh Commandment* (1990), Arnaldo wears a crown resembling those on santos of the Three Magi and holds two rubbings of the baroque-styled, plastic mirror used by his mother throughout the preceding two decades. A possible source for the mirrors might be the handsome painting in Ponce by Bartolome Esteban Murillo entitled *The Immaculate Conception of the Mirror* (1618), which depicts a framed mirror in the lower right section. Stating that the injunction "Know thyself," meaning to be aware of one's own personal and cultural identity, is the eleventh commandment, Roche plays with the limits and the extent of self-knowledge. Because mirrors provide images of the external and not the internal self, they can



Bartolome Esteban Murillo, *The Immaculate Conception of the Mirror*, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., Puerto Rico

be considered instruments that distort what they seem to replicate so faithfully and thus imprecise and even ironic gauges of selfhood. While the two mirrors in this painting resemble Moses's tablets and are filled with foliage and mysterious forms, the masklike head of his mother - who represents Puerto Rico for Roche - peers from behind his much more realistic face to imply that his experience of himself has already been mediated by his mother's image of him and that she in turn is mediated by becoming part of him. In this painting Roche invokes the clichéd view of the Caribbean as a tropical paradise in order to question its legitimacy: instead of finding this lushness comforting, the subject of the painting is in danger of being engulfed by it.

Although Arnaldo Roche-Rabell's work has been deeply personal throughout his first decade of maturity, it has also incorporated, as we have seen, a political subtext regarding relations between the United States

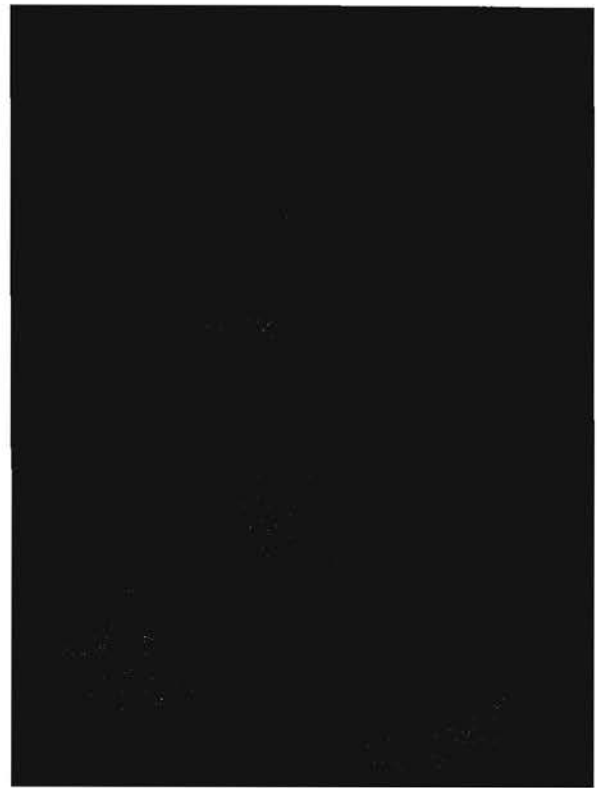
and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. While Puerto Rico has been personified in the person of the artist's mother and richly evoked through racial difference, tropical foliage, an emphasis on religious motifs, and sugar cane, the United States has been metonymically represented through superimposed blue eyes in *Asabache* and held out as a possibility in the partially open gate in *Let Me In*. In 1991 this artist confronted one of the major symbols of United States hegemony in *Under a Total Eclipse of the Sun* where the U.S. Capitol is placed on a charred yet still smoldering easel while a barefoot Roche peers from behind the canvas. To the right is a black model, metamorphosing into nature, whom Roche considers to be a redemption of his deceased brother. In this painting, the artist has indicated a desire to make people in the United States aware of Puerto Rico's power. His frustration is revealed through his symbols: he paints the Capitol as a two-dimensional surrogate because politicians in Washington are unwilling to listen to islanders, and a demonstration of Puerto Rico's essential character can only become a reality when the sun - a symbol of the United States' great power - is temporarily eclipsed. One could speculate that this painting is an elaboration of the structure of the Apollo and Daphne myth that underlies several of Roche's paintings. In this particular work, the artist's brother becomes a male version of the woodland nymph Daphne. He metamorphoses during an eclipse into nature in order to escape the clutches of the sun god in the form of the U.S. Capitol. An element of pathos is to be found in the frustrated attempts of the model to transform the Capitol by showering it with leaves.

The Puerto Rican response to the United States takes a more aggressive turn in *Hurricane from the South* (1991). Personifying nature as a conflation of the Three Fates and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Roche presents his mother as Artemis taking the form of a many breasted goddess, who vomits fern fronds - symbols of her inner nature and unwieldy force - while urging her steed, made from a rubbing of a blind horse, onward to the United States. A black Roche clutching onto his mother wields a leaf-encrusted hand mirror (a symbol, perhaps, of his reflected polymorphous self) with his right hand as if it were a knife, and clutches a branch with the other while a Christ figure wearing an African

mask is in the process of falling off the horse. The Fates are also metonymically present through the ropes that attempt to inhibit the galloping horse as it heaves forward, barely missing the Statue of Liberty in its lumbering gallop. This work exhibits a shiny surface similar to that of most of Roche's paintings rather than the matte finish considered *de rigueur* for so many early and mid-twentieth-century paintings because he wanted to recall the light, freshness, and moisture of his native rain forest instead of the tribal affinities manifested by so many primitivistic paintings.

Although the work was the result of a vision, it is predicated on the well-known linocut *Hurricane from the North* (1955) by Carlos Raque Rivera, a leader of the Generation of 1950, who condemns Puerto Ricans for their mad pursuit of the skeletal figure holding a bag of money that symbolizes the presence of the United States on the island and the consequent deterioration of values. Strongly against the United States, Rivera, who will not permit his work to be shown in this country, believes that Puerto Ricans need to have a voice in their future. Invaded by the United States in 1898 and taken as war booty, the country was run by U.S. appointed governors until 1948 when Luis Muñoz Marín was elected by popular vote. At first clearly aligned with radicals in favor of Puerto Rican independence, Marín channeled his ambitions for the country into the slogan "bread, land, and freedom" in which freedom became a release from the twin bondages of ignorance and poverty. For Roche, as for many Puerto Ricans, Marín became a father figure symbolizing partial release from U.S. tyranny and pride in being an islander. Over the years Roche has returned to the subject of Marín, who became the symbolic father of the Commonwealth and who also resembled his father.

Assuming a different orientation for Puerto Rico in *Pantaleón's Reign* (1991), Roche considers the island's inherent strength by going back to a particularly sensitive and compassionate portrait of the child Juan Pantaleón Avilés that was painted in 1808 by the famous Puerto Rican mulatto artist José Campeche. Born without arms, Pantaleón was taken by his simple yeoman parents to the Bishop Arizmendi in San Juan to be confirmed. A product of the Enlightenment, Don Juan Alejo de Arizmendi apparently was interested in the congenital problem affecting this child and commissioned



José Campeche, *Juan Pantaleón Avilés*, 1808, collection Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Campeche to make this portrait. For *Pantaleón's Reign* (1991) Roche conceives a grown-up version of this child with a ram's head, the symbol of Puerto Rico, to indicate that even if the island is crippled through its commonwealth status that leaves it with amputated arms and flayed so that its inner light shows through, it is proud. Superimposed over a map of the United States, with a hand mirror beside it and a giant erect phallus formed of delicate and spiky leaves, the hybrid figure is a vital symbol of a newly invigorated and mature, yet still helpless Puerto Rico.

While *Pantaleón's Reign* provides the ambivalent symbol of Puerto Rico as a helpless child with a ram's head, *Here You Can Only Die as a Man* (1993) takes the macho culture of the island to task in a portrait of the artist's mother. To create this work Roche first made a rubbing of his mother's body and then presented it ravaged and torn on a bed of hair constituting a funeral pyre. Later he decided to invoke the tree of life symbol -

possibly a reworking of the Daphne myth that had interested him in an earlier portrait of his mother entitled *The Source* - by covering her body with the same leaves (nature) that Roche, who is portrayed in this painting with arms outstretched in the manner of the crucified Christ, is disgorging. In place of arms and legs, Maria has branches. And the Three Fates that were metonymically present in *Hurricane from the South* in the form of ropes representing the lifeline are again represented. Rising up from the body of the artist's dying mother is the outline of a giant phallus that alludes to transcendence and power. But Roche's attempts to critique the dominant macho ideology of his culture seem to be doomed in at least two ways: first by assuming the traditional male role of speaking for the subaltern and deciding the way in which she is to be represented, and second by determining the need to furnish her with a phallus and thus acquiescing to the operative norms of dominant power rather than allowing her to seek a viable alternative, which, of course, might not even be possible, given her world.

Although the accepted practice of reevaluating known works of art in order to establish a dialogue between them is a well-established post modern procedure that is frequently used to undermine the overemphasis on originality in modern art and to create tensions between the old and the new that can be grouped under the heading "intertextuality," Roche's adoption of older paintings runs counter to most post modern attitudes. Instead of undermining his belief in visions, his use of such well-known pieces as *Hurricane from the North* and the portrait of Pantaleón is part of a discourse on the island's identity that he wishes to continue and elaborate. Rather than instilling doubt, he wishes to affirm belief through personally intuited truths, and to use them as guides to assess his relationship with his family, his island culture, and his role as a United States citizen.

Roche first began to radically transform the human body in *Five Hundred Years without an Ear* (1993). In this work that references Van Gogh, whom he greatly admires, Roche decided that the body could become a tool of transformation on a par with brushes, paints, and canvases as well as the subject of the work. Although he continued to work with the model, he began to exaggerate the limbs and to transform them by repeating rubbings of specific ones, at times taking these rubbings

from different points of view.

In this painting Roche parallels views of Chicago with the ancient San Juan fortress called "El Moro." He presents a crazed version of himself running nude through a field of wildly gesticulating sunflowers. Recognizing Van Gogh's response to inner voices as perhaps a sign of schizophrenia, Roche uses his own image as a screen on which to project the delusions of both his brother and this Dutch artist. Although their inner voices may have had tragic results and the depicted Roche might be succumbing to the egomaniacal stance of the two men, the artist suggests a need to be responsive to one's inner self - a need that he dramatizes in his portrayal of wild heliotropic sunflowers shrouded in darkness and bereft of a guiding light. The artist appears to be celebrating the responsiveness of Van Gogh and Arnaldo's brother to inner voices at the same time that he recognizes the great danger in following such a path. The painting can be considered an injunction to Puerto Rico to begin listening to itself and a note of caution concerning the implicit dangers in this undertaking.

Contrary voices and personas posing as reality are the subject of *You Fight Me, You Bless Me* (1993) which presents two figures, wearing realistic masks of the artist's face, locked in combat. Seated in a closed room and on a lace doily representing the Puerto Rico of the artist's youth, the entwined figures are shown without feet, possibly a symbol of their Commonwealth status (their lack of being firmly grounded), as well as an oblique reference to controversies regarding the island's true identity and destiny.

The theme of amputation that is of central importance to *Five Hundred Years without an Ear* and *You Fight Me, You Bless Me* is taken up again in *The Black Man Always Hides His Left Hand* (1993). Returning to the San Juan house of his youth with its bourgeois lace doilies and linoleum floor covering, Roche depicts charred supporting timbers that could be symbols of his tragic childhood. In addition, this confined figure that is too large for the space accommodating it could symbolize the claustrophobia of Puerto Rico's politically limited role. In this painting the artist holds the knife with which he has cut off his left hand - a traditional symbol of the sinister and dark side. This amputated hand, however, is reincarnated as a golden-colored Puerto Rican santos known as "The Powerful Hand" that radiates in this



José Rivera, *Mano Poderosa*, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., Puerto Rico

painting as a fiery aureole. Frequently represented with a stigma indicating its affinities with Christ's suffering, the powerful hand on occasion incorporates five saints, including the Virgin and Christ Child, who are perched on each finger. When the artist makes an actual imprint of his left hand on the canvas to form an image of this powerful emblem, he transmutes this sinister feature into the sacred right hand often employed for this *santos*.

Since the artist has admitted that in pictures in which he portrays himself as a black man, he is usually angry about social wrongs, one might consider that the dual themes of darkness and light in the painting involve not only religious concepts but also racial problems. Thus the transmutation of the amputated left black hand into the light-colored sacred one of the right side might be construed as an ironic comment on racial prejudice. A careful inspection of this painting reveals that the artist's enlarged head has been cut, making him an incipient San Juan (a St. John the Baptist). Peering from behind its left side is a black mask, indicative of a deeper layer of reality

that calls into question easy definitions of either the artist's self or the political being known as the Commonwealth that he believes himself to be symbolizing. This reading is corroborated by the fact that Roche used two differently sized models to create this single figure. The two figures, coupled with the exaggerated arms and legs, structured by overlapping forms, indicate a dialogic self and serve as yet another example of the way that the artist presents Puerto Rico as multivocal rather than univocal.

The political subtext of the Commonwealth that pervades *The Black Man Always Hides His Left Hand* is also evident in *I Want to Die as a Negro* (1993) in which the artist presents an African-Antillean slave as a dwarf, who is being beaten. Etched on his forehead and presumably in his mind is a golden Benin head of a ruler reflecting a grand past. Falling from the sky are blue monotypes of Lincoln-head pennies that allude to promises of emancipation. One might view this painting as personifying the slave status of the Commonwealth vis-à-vis its master, the United States, which can perpetuate the status quo or offer relief in the form of emancipation, which is ironically symbolized as pennies from heaven.

A pendant work *I Can't Make Miracles* (1993), picturing an exhausted image of the artist perched on an enlarged one representing his head, indicates the limits of artistic expression. While the muse in the form of the smaller Roche can inspire new concepts, he cannot enact them. The social actions (i.e. the miracles) must therefore take place in the political sphere, not the artistic arena.

A maze of ladders reconfiguring the confines of the home of the artist's family surrounds the figure in *Tell Your God that His Church is the Best Business* (1994). Glimmers of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Capitol establish once again a political theme. In the center a blue figure without hands, who is pinioned on ladders that offer no hope of escape, assumes a meditative position. Apropos this painting, the artist has quipped, "If your religion is politics, then politics is the best business possible, but if you are religious then they are taking advantage of you." Placing the partially decapitated figure against a large yellow two-dimensional heart shape, the artist stresses the self-destruction that occurs when people are not in touch with their true feelings and ideas, i.e. their heart. In this case islanders are taken to task for the maze of



Giovanni Battista Langetti, *The Torture of Ixion*, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., Puerto Rico

options that they have allowed to imprison them.

The option of outright rebellion is considered suicidal in *You Tell Me if I am Ready for the Cultural Sacrifice* (1994), a painting which reflects the artist's interest in kamikaze pilots who sometimes were willing to sacrifice themselves to political causes, but who at times had to be tied to the seats of their aircraft. Fascinated with the heroism and absurdity of immolating oneself for political and religious ideals, the artist recalls in this picture both the dramatic seventeenth-century baroque painting entitled *The Torture of Ixion* by Giovanni Battista Langetti, prominently displayed in the Ponce Museum, that pictures a mythological figure who had the effrontery to love Hera, and a recent news story about a man, suffering from drug and alcohol abuse, who was prone to violence. While suffering the traumas of a divorce, he developed a plan of aiming his

plane directly at the White House because such an act of defiance would become an important media event and would validate his life. Roche's painting focuses on the elongated body of his then assistant Gamalier which has been flamboyantly covered with feathers together with the fuselage and wings of an aircraft. This tarring and feathering is no doubt a reference to the way political insurrectionists were sometimes handled in the nineteenth century. In the background is the White House. The single propeller of the plane acts as a great saw and decapitates Gamalier; thus emphasizing the theme of sacrifice, and pointing to the absence of San Juan, the island's capital and the titular head of Puerto Rico. Viewing this work as concerned with the absurdity of sacrifice, the artist has mused, "I haven't been given a good reason for sacrifice - this is the plight of Latin America." Another source for this painting is the crucifixion

of Saint Peter, who insisted on being crucified upside down because he deemed himself unworthy to die in the manner of Christ.

A scenario for reconstituting North and South American connections is suggested by *The Bitter Cup of Juan X* (1994) that bears the date December 17, 1992 when Clinton signed NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement that was implemented two years later. Part of a trend toward world-wide regionalization, this new trade policy parallels the formation of the European Union. In December 1994 all the nations in North and South America except Cuba met and agreed to establish a Free Trade Area of the Americas, to hold biennial summit meetings, and to work to complete their negotiations by the year 2005. In his painting Roche heightens the drama of this event by creating a seduction scene, using two rubbings of the same model, and placing the head of Marilyn Monroe on one and a variation of his own on the other. The artist employs Marilyn to represent the United States because she epitomizes a Hollywood brand of beauty, love, and femininity - however, she is only a persona. At the same time that Marilyn cavorts with Roche, she feeds the screaming mouth in his brain a set of values that have no doubt originated in Hollywood and been adopted by the mass media. To his left are two figures from the rape of the Sabines, indicating a possible denouement of this tryst while on Marilyn's right is the Statue of Liberty. According to the artist, this cup is bitter because it represents a coalition of attitudes that have to be consumed by Juan X, and will result in a new order of beings. Instead of a loving cup or trophy, this vessel represents a new challenge for the United States which may have to cooperate with Latinos' ideas even though its ideology may change them.

In *Father Tell Me if You Love Me* (1995) the artist conflates evolution with colonial status when he presents himself both as a United States citizen, who parts the red curtain behind the monkey, and the lowly evolved creature in the foreground who struggles to imitate the child's game of cat's cradle. On the left side of the canvas stands the United States Capitol building and on the right is its Puerto Rican equivalent; the two buildings function as political pendants to the two Roches and a means for the artist to expound on the problems of being a colonial. In conversation Roche has commented



Osiris Delgado, *Gianina - The Girl with String*, 1965, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., Puerto Rico

on the fact that Puerto Rico has unfortunately been cast in the role of a monkey who struggles to imitate activities it does not understand. A source for the painting is Osiris Delgado's *Gianina - The Girl with String* (1965) in the Ferré Foundation in Ponce, depicting the artist's daughter Gianina intently playing the cat's cradle - a symbol perhaps of the type of interconnected web of activities that this painter/art historian anticipated the next generation facing. As a member of Gianina's generation, Roche responds to Delgado's optimistic and yet wary prognostication with a macabre night scene that functions as a medieval miracle play allegorizing the island's plight as an ongoing interlocution between its inner and outer selves. Similarly to a number of Roche's recent paintings, this work implicitly poses unsettling questions. What would happen if Puerto Ricans, who have been United States citizens by fiat since 1917, petitioned their country to make their island the fifty-first state? Does the Capitol in Washington, serving

metonymically the father's role in Roche's painting, want to adopt the Commonwealth as a full-fledged member of its family? Having won its own independence from colonial status in 1776, is the U.S. capable of loving and accepting Puerto Ricans as equals? Does it even know who they are? What functions do the monkey's mimicry and the resultant star serve? Does the pastiche undermine and displace ambitions about possible statehood to the level of a child's game? And does it critique the oppressor or the oppressed? As an artist Roche is concerned with cultural problems, not possible political solutions. His primary concern in his recent work is with the life and death of his culture and the closed colonized status it must endure. As this painting makes abundantly clear, Roche is not rebelling against the United States. His strategy is more complex: he seeks to supplant imperialism by rewriting it in terms of an internal dialogue between his free and subjected selves so that the text of imperialism will be undermined by a doubling of himself and by replacing a socio-economic and political discourse with an artistic one. In this way he replaces a univocal view with a polyphony of inner and outer voices, as well as colonial and national selves, and employs art as the most far-reaching and powerful ideological tool at society's disposal.

The dark night of *Father Tell Me if You Love Me* is followed by the more positive crepuscular light of *Red from the Heart* (1996) in which the artist finds a natural equivalent for the string-game star in the form of an echinoderm. He likens his fishing to the surrealist exploits of the oceans of the unconscious, and he nets in these universal waters a great catch that includes a red starfish, a bloody creature taking the form of an enlarged heart - the fifty-first state? - that he apprehensively offers.

The art that Roche has created during the past fifteen years can be considered an extended study of the self. Roche began to question the basis of gauging one's true personality when his proved to be a product of chemical imbalances. Then he moved to a new definition dependent on an intense examination of his persona that he in turn critiqued by relying on his dreams. In the process he began to come to terms with an interactive sense of self that is consistent with the theories of family therapists, who have dispensed with monolithic definitions of personality, in favor of investigations of familial patterns

and role playing. This enlarged sense of a transactional self began to guide Roche in the direction of social, political, and cultural affiliations and caused him to focus on U.S. and Puerto Rican relations.

Since the late eighteenth century nationalism has been one of the cornerstones of identity; without its support one's sense of self is destabilized and subject to question. If one is a citizen of a colony, one's identity can be an uncomfortable amalgamation of traits dependent on the dominant power joined by some recalcitrant indigenous ones. To be a colonial is to be in perpetual doubt - a geo-political brand of post modernism. Even if one is accustomed to placing great faith in hunches and dreams, one's sincerity and intensity of belief are undermined by the indeterminacy of one's affiliations. The situation is akin to the theatrical metaphor frequently employed by Roche for his paintings. While baroque artists might have been able to use theatrical analogies to validate the sacred dramas of daily life, Roche's theater presents reality suffused with artifice and assumed ideologies. His work is important to colonials and postcolonials around the globe because of the ways that reality is framed and deconstructed. It is equally instructive for First World cultures who are forming alliances based on parity with Third World powers and newly established nations. In his art Roche mounts a double-edged critique that ultimately defracts power: he prosecutes the colonial from the point of view of a U.S. citizen and then reverses himself by considering the U.S. from the perspective of a colonial.

In placing Arnaldo Roche-Rabell's work in an art historical perspective, one might say that he is this generation's Wilfredo Lam. As Lam plumbed his Chinese and African ancestry in his work, Roche assays his Spanish and African-Antillean heritage. Just as Lam joined aspects of cubism with indigenous subjects from Cuba, so Roche combines an inherited expressionism with aspects of Puerto Rican vegetation and folk art. Both men have created profound iconographies that are hybrids of mainstream ideas and aspects of Antillean culture. But whereas Lam was a thoroughgoing modernist who believed in the cogency and efficacy of his symbols and chosen medium, Roche is both a modernist and a post modernist. While he is filled with conviction about the significance of his dreams that have become the basis for his paintings and is committed to manifesting

these concepts in paint, he is aware of the slipperiness of identity and the range of culturally and politically constructed subjectivities constituting the self known as Arnaldo Roche-Rabell that can change the way both he and his paintings are perceived and accepted. The permutations in his art are many, and include a number of occasions whereby the self quotes itself in conversation with itself in order to destroy simple definitions of a unilaterally affiliated and undivided self. Ultimately his works are similar to the hand mirrors and masks proliferated throughout them: they are capable of revealing and also obfuscating reality. Roche's uncommonwealth is Puerto Rico, a region and a political entity mined to reveal the uncertainty of identity in our post modern world.

Notes

1. José Luis González, *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country and Other Essays*, Trans. Gerald Guinness. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc., 1993).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

3. Marta Traba, *The Rebellion of the Santos* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Puerto Museo de Santos, 1972), p. 82.

4. This investigation of Arnaldo Roche-Rabell's work takes full advantage of information gathered in a series of extensive interviews with the artist that the author conducted in San Juan in November 1993 and February 1995. Before this study Roche's political references were viewed as only occasional lapses from his main subject, himself. The cohesiveness of his overall program and the way that he uses himself and his technique as distillates of an imperial/colonial dialectic is one of this essay's contributions, as is the understanding of the range and extent of art historical sources that he mines and transforms in his work. At a future date the author intends to investigate Roche-Rabell's use of Pre-Columbian art as an ongoing subtext for his work.

5. Julius S. Held, "Introduction" in Julius S. Held, René Taylor, James N. Carder, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., (Ponce, Puerto Rico: Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1984), p. xi.

6. Traba, p. 77.

7. Donald Kuspit, *The Existential/Activist Painter: The Example of Leon Golub* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. 78.

8. This brief discussion of printmaking in Puerto Rico is indebted to the excellent overview of the development of twentieth-century art on this island by Marimar Benitez. See Benitez, "The Special Case of Puerto Rico" in *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970* (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1988), pp. 72-105.

9. Melvin M. Tumin with Arnold Feldman, "Social Class and Skin Color in Puerto Rico" in Melvin M. Tumin (ed.), *Comparative Perspectives on Race Relations* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), pp. 197-214, which is reprinted from *Social Class and Social Change in Puerto Rico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 227-246.

10. René Taylor, *José Campeche and His Time* (Ponce, Puerto Rico: Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1988), pp. 210-211.