

Children of Darkness

Refnel This Montes

El Museo Del Barrio, West Wing October 28, 1982-February 11, 1983 ...what we see when asleep is sleep. **Heraclitus**

"...the war between the children of light and the children of darkness rages on to eternity. Endowed with the power of God and their unprincipled scorn for chaos, the children of light are apt to win the battles.

But the children of darkness are said to have many more alternatives; they surge from the void unto life—they are seekers of light."

Rafael Colón Morales, October, 1982

The work selected for this exhibition traces the last ten years of Rafael Colón-Morales' search to extend the range of painting. Working with acrylic, he explores the full potential of this medium, in order to re-affirm the validity and meaningfulness of painting as a contemporary means of artistic expression.

During the late sixties, contrary to the technically conventional and traditional formality of the San Juan artist, Colón-Morales adopts the technique of free and spontaneous expression. Surrealistic paintings produced during this period mark for the artist the development of a coherent philosophy about his work and a break from commercialism and the established esthetic.

Relocating to New York in the early 1970s, the artist abandons figurative content and produces a series of highly textured abstract paintings. Eventually, experimentation leads him into the development of the acrylic hanging skin. He incorporates into these translucent acrylic skins, not only geometric forms, but also culturally rooted biomorphic and mythological figures. For Colón-Morales this is the beginning of a struggle to find a balance between experimentation and automatism in his work—a challenge which he welcomes. The title of the exhibition, "Children of Darkness" for the artist refers to a state of being in which the subjects emerge from darkness in search of knowledge.

Gladys Peña, Curator

THE ICONOGRAPHY AND THE PELLEJOS OF RAFAEL COLÓN MORALES

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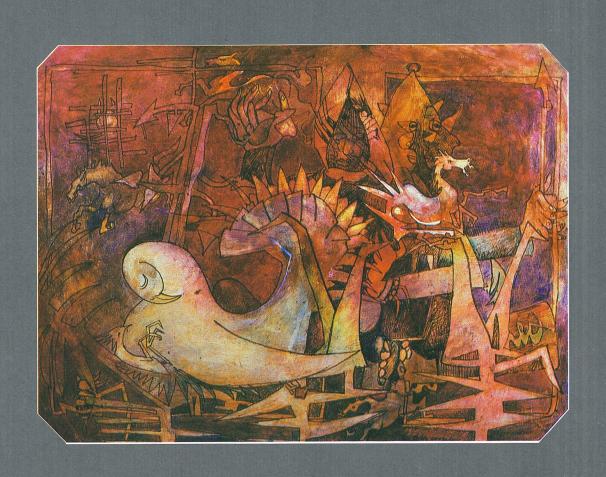
Walter Friedlander has written that two basic currents run throughout the history of French art, the rational and the irrational. Friedlander might well have applied that description to the art of all of Western civilization. The rational school is perhaps best exemplified by Nicholas Poussin (1594?-1665) and the calculated formality of his composition. This tendency was later to inspire the neo-classical movement as championed by Jacques Louis-David. The irrational tendency, often labeled as sensual and decorative by its detractors, was to find its maximum development in the works of the Flemish, Peter Paul Rubens. His art, like that of Velazquez, was characterized by loose and free brushstrokes and took delight in the richness of objects. The work of Rafael Colón-Morales is steeped in the irrational tradition of the Rubenist —rich in the sensuality of color, movement, form and spirit.

However, the works covered by this retrospective (1972 through 1982) must also be understood in iconographic terms. The almost overpowering wealth of personal symbols that are steeped in the past and present lore and reality of the Caribbean, and in particular of Puerto Rico, makes the articulation of these pieces more complex, and compels the viewer to study and compare works so that their inner meanings may be understood. The works on view are the culmination of many years of inward searching for truth by Colón-Morales. Although these iconographic meanings are new, they are certainly steeped in the rich mythology of the

Arawak-speaking Taino Indians. Once understood, the symbols which these creatures represent begin to reveal truths not evident in a speedy analysis. The work of Rafael Colón-Morales must also be understood within the specific cultural context in which they were produced. These pieces are echoes of long forgotten cultures that are essential to the understanding of today's Antillian.

When viewing the work of Colón-Morales one is aware of the high energy and the seeming chaos. Forceful diagonals create a pictorial sensation of movement that may be related to the work of Jackson Pollock. Although Pollock's approach is spontaneous, his work like that of Rafael Colón-Morales' is not completely the result of chance—they are carefully thought out. Such is the case with "Retorno a la Tierra," (1979) and less so with the experimental works such as "El Techo," (1975). During periods of experimentation Colón-Morales' work tends to be non-objective. The iconographic problems are almost non-existent in these transitional works where the artist is more interested in technical proficiency. I shall refer to these works more in detail in my discussion of the pellejos (skins), but our main concern here is to get a grasp of this private iconoclasm which so enriches this work.

In "Retorno a la Tierra" the action occurs at dusk or night,



the sky is a deep rich blue. In the right hand corner is a *Bohío* (peasant shack) in front of which is a figure half man and half animal. At a slight distance from this figure and forming something of a concentric circle are seen a number of various other references to animals, some real (the horse), some mythological, (the dragon), and others that are the product of the artist imaginative reality. Whereas the dragon and the horse are facing away from this circle the other insect-like creatures have the effect of keeping this grouping together. In this picture we see many of the creatures that appear in other works sometimes in different groupings.

Why are the horse and dragon looking away from the action? The answer certainly requires a familiarity with the culture, history and traditions of the Caribbean. Horses were brought to the New World by Spain, and only too frequently they were used by the military classes in their campaigns to conquer the aboriginal inhabitants. Legends in Europe, North and South America frequently use the white horse as a symbol of dignity and purity of intention and strength. However, in "Retorno a la Tierra," the horse is viewed not as a strong conquerer but almost as a disinterested and tired participant. He slowly moves away from the crowd that surrounds him and his head is low. If we juxtapose his weary movement with that of the green dragon we see an intense interaction. The dragon is running away with great vitality and the other creatures seem quietly to be enjoying the repossession of their land. To be sure, the moods suggested by these animals mirror those of human beings.

When one considers that the only reference to humans is in the form of a centaur, the varying personalities of the animals take on a greater poignancy. Compared to "Retorno a la Tierra," the "Children of Darkness" series (1975 to 1980) explodes with anger and tense activity. In "Children of Darkness III," horses of various sizes attack a white dove. The angularity of the horses create sharp edges that charge the canvas with great tension. The dove is serene, with its head held high as it defends itself against the larger aggressors or conquistadores. The mad, frenzied movement around the dove is heightened by the very whiteness of its color. If physical reality demands that dove be smaller than horses, the more subjective reality represented in the work suggests a spiritual bigness. Interestingly, the series works in reverse, for in the earlier larger works, the dove appears passive whereas the horses are free to act as they wish. In the last piece of the series the dove reacts, symbolically this is also the smallest work in the series. This apparent contradiction of the large aggressors vs. the small yet symbolically larger dove has its parallel in Puerto Rican folklore and literature. Among the Island's peasants, lore abounds in which the large güaraquao can only be killed by the small pittirre. Such legends serve as a somewhat tragic ray of hope and valor in the face of oppression and injustice; behind this idea lies the greater concept that the small or poor man someday will be able to conquer his oppressors, be they individuals or institutions.

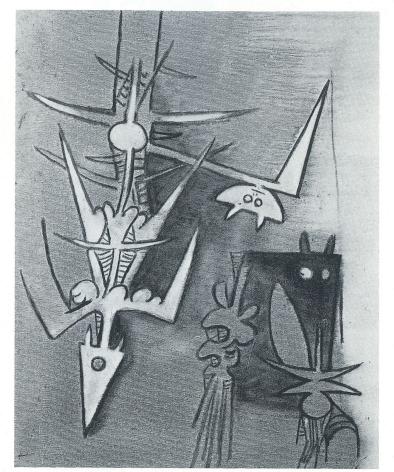
If the dove is therefore a symbol of the small man we must then ask again what the horse symbolizes? Once again we

must see it as a negative force. In "Retorno a La Tierra" the horse turns away from the tranquility of the bohio, but in "Children of Darkness" the horse is hostile, aggressive and oppressive. The image of the aggressive horse is a more frequent articulation in Colón-Morales' work, eq. "El Mal de Bubas," (1976), "Pollo Raz," (1976), "Hijos del Caos" (1978), "Remontemonos" (1980), and others. Noted earlier in this essay, the horse is not native to the New World, but rather was introduced to the American continent through the Spanish colonization. It would therefore be safe to see the horse in the work of Colón-Morales as a symbol of the European settlers who brought it over. This use of the horse is in complete contrast to the significance of the same animal in Picasso's "Güernica." In "Güernica" the horse is the common man's ally who along with his master is tortured and killed. This vision is common to the European tradition, and has been imposed on the American Psyche. Colón-Morales breaks with this concept, thereby creating a new iconography, a New World or at least Antillean imagery for the horse.

In this cruel, vicious and aggressive world there are also insects that are native to the Caribbean. These same sharp forms can be seen in much of Wilfredo Lams' Cuban jungle paintings. Similar in form but different in iconography, the insects in Colón-Morales' paintings of this period are giant creatures as in "Lilbélulas" (1979), and "Insecto Interior" (1979). These are creatures that cannot go beyond their smallness and are symbolically the antithesis of the dove in "Children of



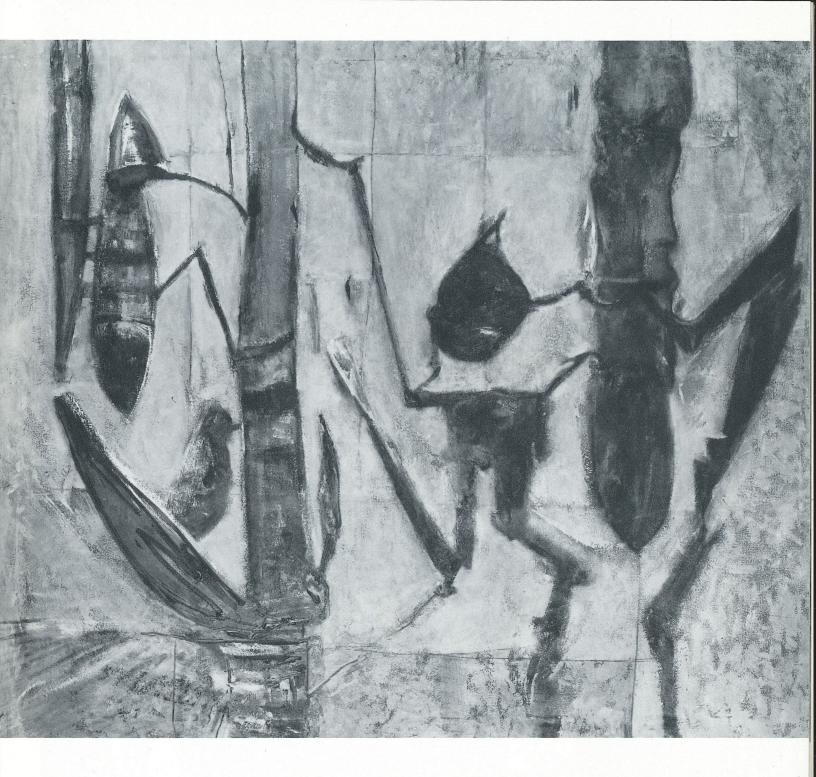
35 Pupitre, 1978 / Acrylic Skin on Object



Wilfredo Lam Totemic Bird, 1972 / Oil on Canvas, $45 \, \mathrm{cm} \times 35 \, \mathrm{cm}$. Collection of L. Moltracio

Darkness." In fact, in "Retorno a la Tierra," they sit placidly with the horse and dragon.

Other animals such as cows and birds enhance the iconographic depths of Colón-Morales' work. By deciphering their meanings the viewer will have a more gratifying experience. Iconographic symbols are one of the oldest means of communication known to man. They fill the walls of Lascaux and become bewildering in Greek and African mythology. They protected the Early Christians, enriched the Byzantine world and continue to exist into our very age. Man has very frequently had to hide or amend his message with symbols that were understood by the members of the "group." In the 20th Century, and particularly since the 1950s, artists frequently have developed highly personal icons. Only too often the capability of these personal icons to communicate more profound universal ideas has been limited to a visual monologue—or at best, a dialogue with an intellectual elite. The uniqueness of Colón-Morales' work in part lies in the fact that although his symbolic language is personal, it is steeped in the much older traditions of Europe and pre-Columbian America, most particularly the Caribbean Basin, and with careful observation slowly reveals its messages to us. As we have seen, these paintings use the Caribbean reality and specifically the Puerto Rican condition to make universal statements about the nature of man. The lessons to be learned are not about the aggressiveness they often depict, but of justice and humane understanding of our fellow man. In this sense they are a rational use of irrational forms.





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About the Pellejos

Among the varied technical achievements of Rafael Colón-Morales the most highly creative is the *pellejos*, or skins. The process of making these paintings which hang suspended in air, merits a special description.

The pellejos emerged from his earlier experiments with texture. These experiments, exemplified by "Lagartijos," (1974) and "El Techo," (1975) were free in form and full of motion. In them we can see Ithe same energy that fills many of his acrylic skins. Eventually figures introduced into the compositions, as well as technical adaptations that provided depth, resulted in the three-dimensionality of his pellejo paintings.

In making a pellejo the artist applies paint directly to any shape or size glass. When the surface dries, new layers of paint are applied, using the same colors or others, until the desired consistency is reached. He then peels the paint off the glass. The hardened acrylic is transparent as a stained glass window and as flexible as linen. This process of layering paint also allows the artist to experiment with his imagery. As the surface of the painting thickens the images are sometimes altered and the painting on the final top layer may interact with those on the bottom layers. Ideally, the pellejos should be hung from ceilings in front of large windows, or at a small distance from the entry of light. This permits the viewer to see the development of the work, including compositional "errors."

The artist has searched inexhaustibly for new ways to manipulate acrylic skins. Characteristics of the medium: its flexibility, translucency and three-dimensionality presented exhibition problems which forced him into further experimentation. The problems were fortunate, as can be seen from the results. Some pieces have been transferred onto plexiglass and others onto canvas, as assemblages which incorporate small objects—a razor blade, a paint tube, a photograph, perhaps, may find their way into these highly organized constructions. He has also turned them into sculptures by mounting them on objects such as a wooden horse, a chair or the metal frame of a folding cot.

Although these experiments express Rafael Colón-Morales' interest in painting as a still viable medium, their content is also indicative of his preoccupation with mythology of the

Taino Indians of Puerto Rico. To him the mythology of this early culture is a tool for the formulation of thought and he utilizes myths in many of his works to express his personal vision, desires, anxieties and needs. The *pellejos*, to Colón-Morales, represent the shedding of skin which is the symbol of rebirth—a constant theme in the mythology of the pre-Columbian Indian of the Caribbean.

Mario Cesar Romero October, 1982

Special thanks to Drs. Elizabeth Parker and Andree Hayrim of the Art History Dept. at Fordham University, for their quidance.

We must look and look till we live the painting, and for a fleeting moment become identified with it. If we do not succeed—it is useless to lie to ourselves into believing that we do. A good rough test is whether we feel that it is reconciling us with life. No artifact is a work of art if it does not help to humanize us. Without art, visual, verbal and musical, our world would be a jungle.

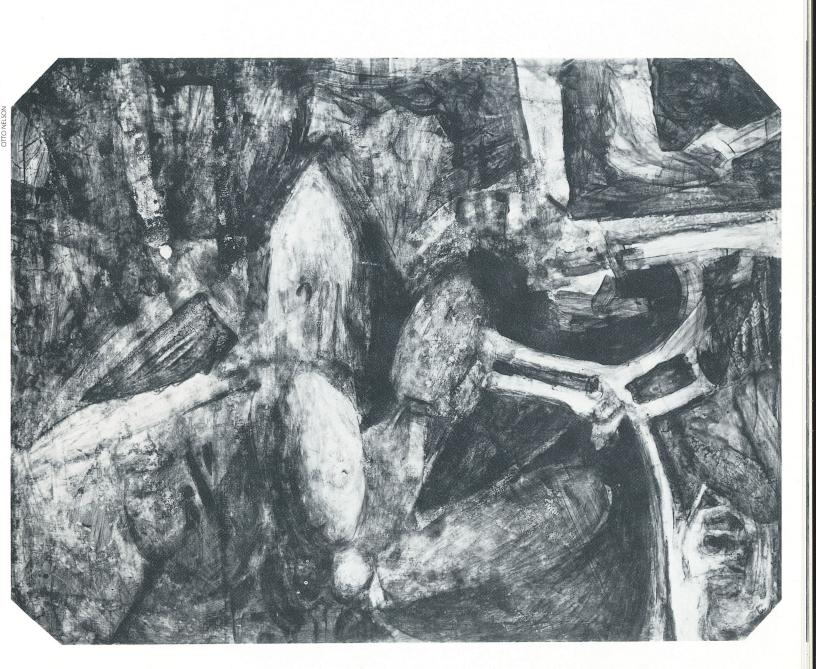
From the correspondence of Bernhard Berenson, Villa I Tatti, Fiorenze, January, 1952



OTTO NELSC

- 13 El Techo, 1975 / Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 70 × 84
- 43 Catre, 1978 / Acrylic Skin on Object









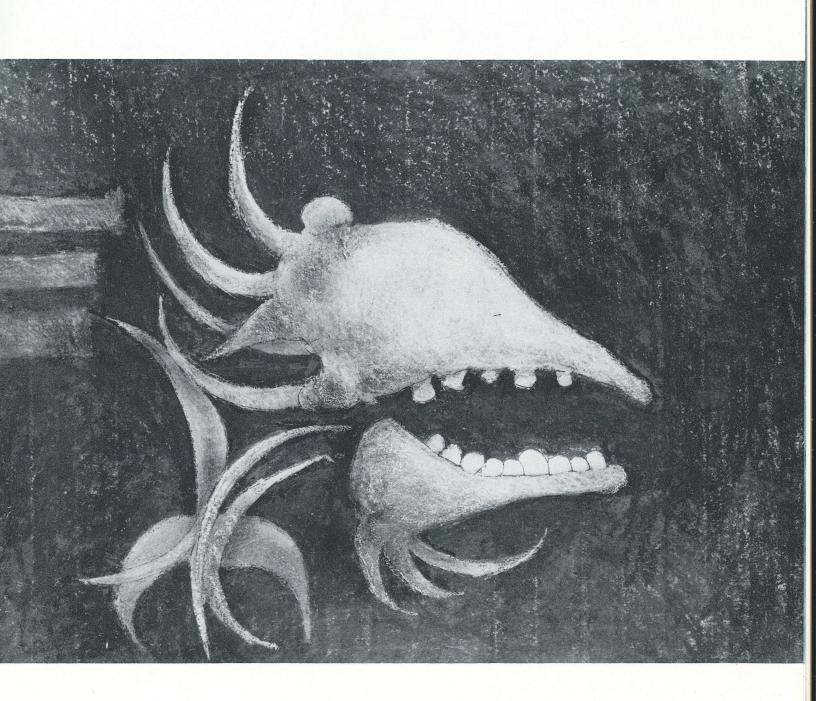
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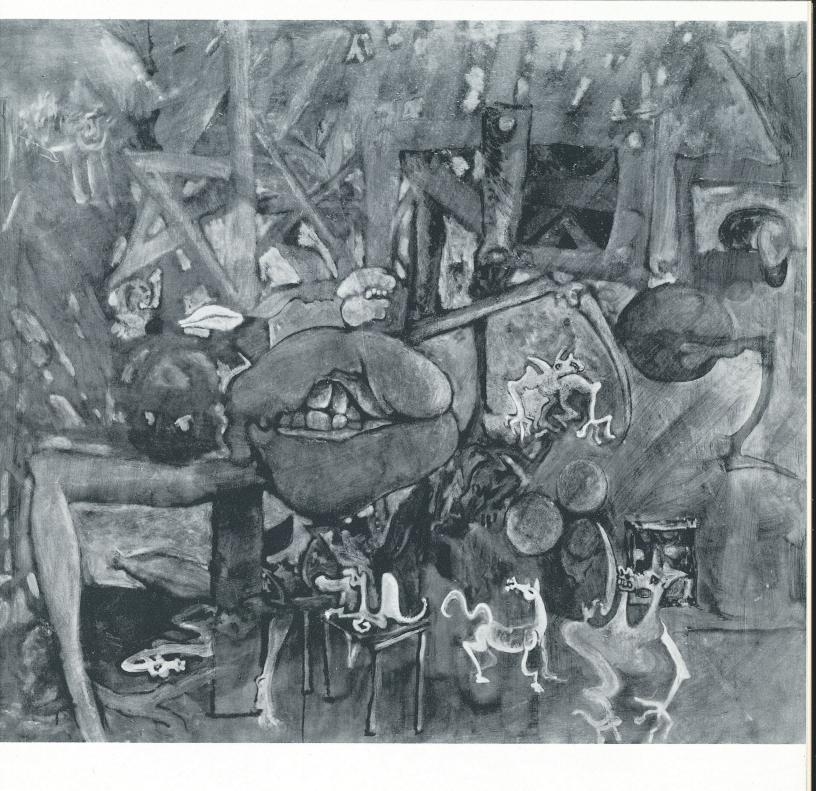


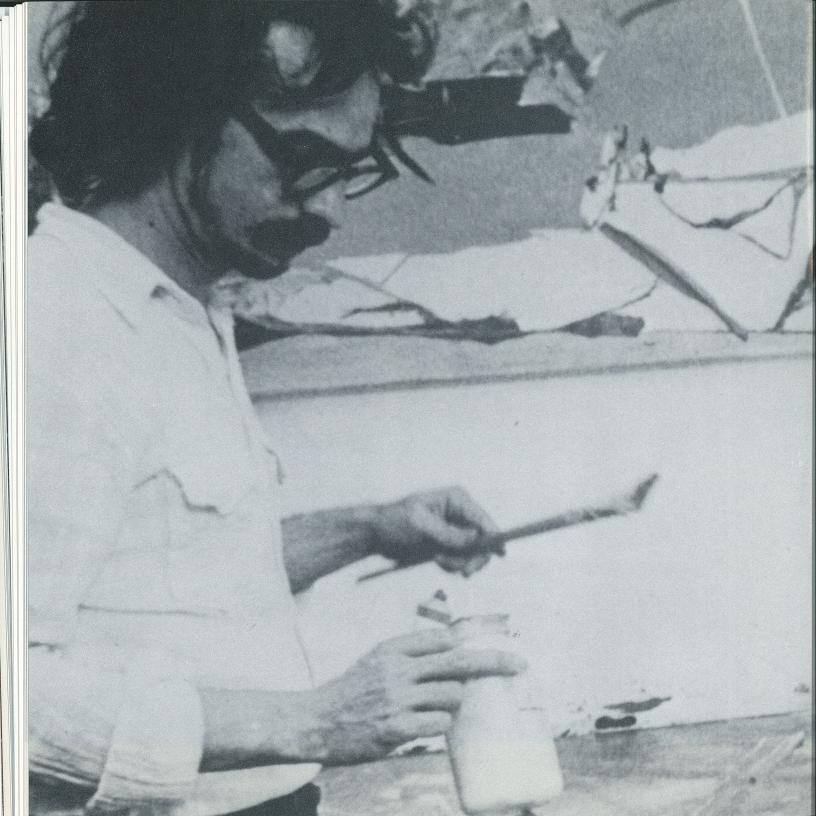




The same







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Biographical Notes

1941 1959	Born in Trujillo Alto, Puerto Rico Received scholarship from the New York Post to study Fine Arts, University of Puerto Rico.
1964	Graduated with High Honors from the University of Puerto Rico
1965-66	Graduate Studies at the American University, Washington D.C.
1966-67	Studied Graphics at the San Fernando Academy of Arts, Madrid, Spain.
1968-71	Instructor of Fine Arts, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras and Arecibo campuses, Puerto Rico.
1972-76	Instructor of "History of Puerto Rican Art", Brooklyn Community College, New York
1972-76	Instructor of "History of Puerto Rican Art", New York State University, Albany, New York.
1978-81	Instructor of Printing and Graphics, School of Arts of the Museo del Barrio, New York
1980-81	Lecturer and tour guide, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
1981	Artist in Residence, Institute of Urban Resources Inc., New York

uis Morale:

Selected Individual Exhibits

1963	Museo de la Universidad de Puerto Rico,
	Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. Paintings
1965	Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña,
	San Juan, Puerto Rico. Paintings
1968	Galería Santiago, San Juan, Puerto Rico.
	Paintings
	E. 1 (D . B. M. V.)

1975 Friends of Puerto Rico, New York.
Drawings and Environmental Installation

1978 Caymán Gallery, New York. Paintings and Sculptures

1981 International Monetary Fund, Washington, D.C. Paintings

1982 Galería Moriviví, New York. Miniatures and Hanging Acrylic Skins

Selected Collective Exhibits

1974 Festival de Navidad, Annual Show, Ateneo Puertorriqueño, San Juan, Puerto Rico

1976 Iman-Latin American Artists in New York, Center for Interamerican Relations, New York.

1977 Latin Artist, Xerox Annual International Exhibition, Rochester, New York.

1978 Resurgimiento, El Museo del Barrio, New York.

1980 Artists Against Racism, Westbeth Gallery, New York.

1981 Muestra de Pintura, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, San Juan, Puerto Rico

1981 Latin American Art, Stroudsberg College, Pennsylvania.

1981 Arboles de Octubre, Galería Moriviví, New York.

1981 Hand-painted Photographs, Photo Gallery, New York.

1982 Latin American Contemporary Artists, Fordham University, New York.

1982 Los Tainos-A Visual Tradition, El Museo del Barrio, New York.

Major Projects

1979 "Stampede", Wall mural, $100' \times 40'$, NAACP Day Care Center, Bronx, New York

1980 "Cockfight", Wall mural, 60' × 20', Pyramid House, Bronx, New York.

Reviews

1978 David Herkovitz, "It was grey even when it was sunny", The Village Voice, September 24, 1978.

1979 Evan Ashbury, "Colon-Morales at the Museum of the Bronx", The New York Times, March 29, 1979.

1979 Peter Bloch, "Painters from Puerto Rico", Plus Ultra Editions.

1980 Osiris Delgado, Encyclopedia of Puerto Rico (art volume x, Editorial EDIT.)

Lectures and Publications

1976 *Genealogy of Puerto Rican Art,* Quimbamba, El Museo del Barrio, New York.

1978 Puerto Rican Artists in New York, Vortice, Stanford University, California.

1980 Lecture, "Symbols in Viking Art", Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

1981 Lecture, "Puerto Rican Art", Duke Ellington School to the Arts, Washington, D.C.

1981 Lecture, "Puerto Rican Art", Georgetown University, Department of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.

1982 Lecture, "Los Tainos", El Museo del Barrio, New York.

1982 Lecture, "Political Aspects of Puerto Rican Art", Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York.

1982 Lecture, "Political Aspects of Puerto Rican Art", Cooper Union School of Science and Arts, New York.

1982 Puerto Rican Nationalist Art: A History, A Tradition, A Necessity, Artworkers News, New York.

List of Works

- 1 Interior con Zapato, 1972 Oil on Canvas, 36 × 40 Collection of Luis Feliciano, P.R.
- 2 Caballo Viejo, 1972 Oil on Masonite, 32 × 33 Collection of Felix Toledo, P.R.
- 3 Aniversario, 1972
 Oil on Masonite, 40 × 44
 Collection of Familia
 Rosario-Nieves. P.R.
- 4 Lemuria, 1972 Oil on Masonite, 40 × 52 Collection of Familia Rosario-Nieves, P.R.
- 5 **Hueso I,** 1972 Oil on Canvas, 40 × 421/2
- 6 Toma de Conciencia, 1973 (Zanahoreasa), Oil on Canvas, 50 × 50 Collection of Luis Feliciano
- 7 Mollejas, 1973 Oil on Canvas, 36 × 42 Collection of Luis Angel Curbelo, P.R.
- **8 Apestocito,** 1973 Oil on Canvas, 50½×58
- 9 Bird, 1974 Oil Stick on Paper, 50 × 40 Collection of Frances and Samuel Lacher, N.Y.
- 10 Insecto y Bohio, 1974 Oil Stick on Paper, 50 × 40
- 11 Lagartijos, 1974 Acrylic on Canvas, 68 × 80 Collection of Felix Toledo, Washington, D.C.
- 12 Shazam, 1974 Oil on Canvas, 50 × 60
- 13 El Techo, 1975 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 70 × 84 Collection of Felix Toledo, Washington, D.C.
- 14 Octagonal I, II, 1975
 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 42 × 56
 Collection of Felix Toledo,
 Washington, D.C.

- 15 Insectos, 1975
 Oil Stick on Paper, 50 × 40
 Collection of Frances and
 Samuel Lacher, N.Y.
- **16 Children of Darkness I,** 1975 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 42½×57
- **17 Demivan Cohoba Joraba,** 1976 Hanging Acrylic Skin, 40 × 50
- **18 Yombina,** 1976 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 57 × 42
- 19 Compadre de Camuy, 1976 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 42×50 Collection of Frances and Samuel Lacher, N.Y.
- 20 Children of Darkness II, 1976 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 42 × 57 Collection of Carol and Herbert Diamond, N.Y.
- 21 Orgánico, 1976 Acrylic on Canvas, 42×57
- **El Mal de Bubas,** 1976 Hanging Acrylic Skin, 55 × 37
- 23 Insectos I & II, 1976 Hanging Acrylic Skin, 48 × 56
- **24 Bullfighter,** 1977 Acrylic Hanging Skin, 48 × 56
- 25 Itiba, 1977 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 57 × 42
- **26 Am Peluchi,** 1977 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 57 × 42
- 27 Sultan Ris, 1977
 Acrylic Skin on Plexiglas, 46 × 56
 Collection of Bruce Wasserman, N.Y.
- **28 Pollo Raz I & II,** 1977 Hanging Acrylic Skin, 48 × 60
- **29 Hijo de Itiba,** 1977 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 46 × 60
- 30 Hijos del Caos, 1978
 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 19×36
 Collection of Felix Toledo,
 Washington, D.C.
- **31 Shaman,** 1978 Acrylic on Plexiglas, 26 × 36 Collection of Liz Torres, California
- **32 Virgen del Sagrado Corazón**, 1978 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 18 × 15 Collection of Felix Toledo, P.R.
- 33 Children of Darkness III, 1978 Acrylic Skin on Plexiglas, 18½×31 Collection of Thedis and Edward Shenberg, N.Y.

- **34 Trees,** 1978 Hanging Acrylic Skin, 80 × 55
- **35 Silla, Catre y Pupitre,** 1978 Acrylic Skin over Objects
- **Marine Landscape,** 1979 Acrylic Hanging Skin, 60 × 45
- 37 Pelea de Gallo, 1979 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 42 × 50 Collection of Jorge Hernandez, N.Y.
- 38 Retorno a la Tierra, 1979 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 40 × 50 Collection of Familia de la O-Medina, N.Y.
- 39 Insecto Interior, 1979
 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 40 × 44
 Collection of Familia de
 Ia O-Medina, N.Y.
- 40 Ear, 1979
 Oil Stick on Paper, 50 × 40
 Collection of Frances and
 Samuel Lacher, N.Y.
- **41 Era Joven,** 1979 Acrylic Hanging Skin, 63 × 43
- **42 Planeta,** 1979 Oil Stick on Paper, 50 × 40
- **43 Libélulas,** 1979 Oil Stick on Paper, 50 × 40
- 44 Remontemonos, 1980 Acrylic on Canvas, 50 × 60 Collection of Felix Toledo, Washington, D.C.
- **45 Hueso II,** 1980 Acrylic Skin on Canvas, 47 × 55 Collection of Felix Toledo, Washington, D.C.
- **46 Caracol**, 1980 Oil Stick on Paper,, 37 × 49 Jane & José Fuentes, N.Y.
- **47 Guabá,** 1981 Oil on Canvas, 52 × 60
- 48 Bocas, 1982 Oil Stick and Pastel on Paper, 40 × 36



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