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Nuyorican visionary: Jorge Soto and the evolution of an Afro-Taíno aesthetic at Taller Boricua

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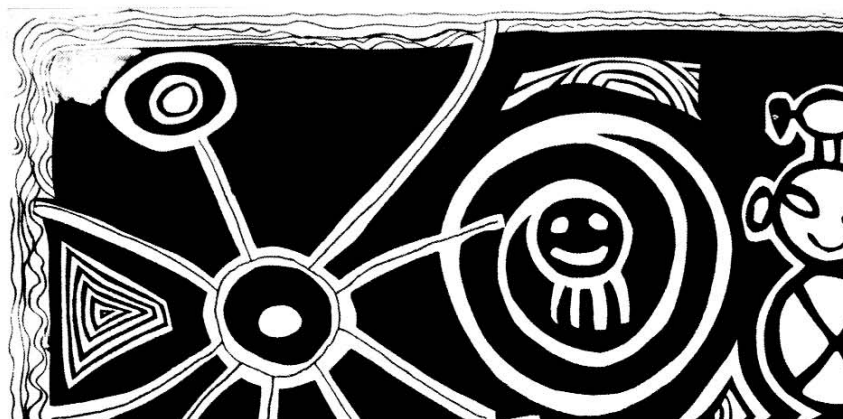
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Founded in El Barrio, New York, in 1970 by Marcos Dimas, Adrian Garcia, Manuel “Neco” Otero, Martin Rubio, and Armando Soto, Taller Boricua Puerto Rican Workshop ranks as one of the oldest extant multi-disciplinary artist-run spaces in the United States. Taller Boricua’s current directors, Martin and Fernando Salicrup, take pride in noting that the workshop has adhered to its mission of using art as a tool for education and community building through a wide-range of exhibitions, literary readings, dances, festivals, urban planning, and free art classes for over 35 years. The number of visual artists, writers, and musicians who have frequented Taller Boricua’s workspaces in El Barrio is large and luminous. During the heyday of the Nuyorican art and poetry movement of the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, Taller Boricua’s stable of collaborators included the following: Américo Casiano, Máximo Colón, Marcos Dimas, Sandra María Echevarría, Gilberto Hernández, Adrian Garcia, Jesús “Papoletto” Meléndez, José Morales, Máximo Colón Morales, Néstor Otero, Manuel “Neco” Otero, Carlos Osorio, Martín Pérez, Pedro Pietri, Armando Soto, Jorge Soto, Rafael Tufiño, Nítza Tufiño, Fernando Salicrup, Sammy Tanco and Manuel “Manny” Vega. Discussing the workshop’s

Soto's recollections reveal that art became a way for him to process the incidents that he witnessed during childhood. Perhaps to give Soto a respite from the escalating violence in the South Bronx, Soto's parents sent him to Puerto Rico for an extended stay in 1960. Returning to New York in 1961, Soto attended two years of high school while working part-time in a handbag factory. In 1963 he dropped out of high school and enlisted in the army.

Joined United States Army as some illusionary way to escape the disorientation and alienation that I was living (feeling lost). But to find institutionalized abuse (more alienation). Lasted six months, spent five months in West Germany, did studies in landscape drawings of the country landscapes.⁶

Released from the Army in 1965, Soto returned to New York and determined to become an artist. Between 1965 and 1971 Soto established a pattern of working in various media, including painting, sculpture, and drawing.

looking at photographs, sculptures and other things and making drawings—because it was important in terms of our identity,” stated Nitza Tufiño. “We have that much about the arts in Puerto Rico, we don’t have many books, no videos. So it became important for us to record our history and send it to so people to study.”¹⁰

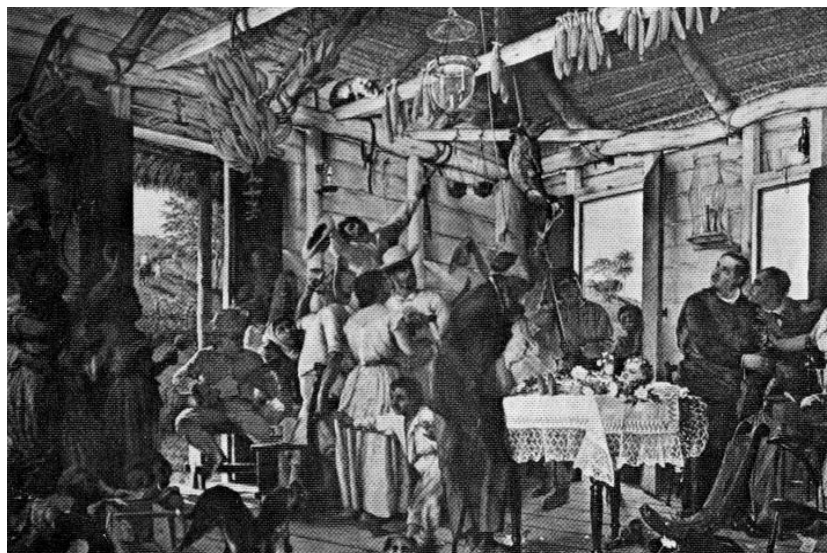
The exhibitions and visual arts workshops that Taller Boricua artists organized during the 1970s were acts of political/pedagogical intervention in a city that had little information or appreciation of Taíno and Afro-Puerto Rican artifacts. Jorge Soto’s poster announcing an exhibit at Taller Boricua in 1974 demonstrates a multi-cultural direction that he took in his imagery. The poster depicts a carnival mask from Loíza Aldea besides a Taíno stone carving and is embellished by several examples of Taíno pictographs throughout the poster’s upper zone. For viewers familiar with the Puerto Rican poster tradition, Soto’s work may be imitative of graphics rendered by the island’s master printmakers: Rafael T. Lorenzo Homar and Carlos Raquel Rivera. But the script on the bottom half of the poster is uniquely New York Rican and articulates Soto’s appreciation of the

profile to depict Atabeya's double identity. Facing front, Atabeya has a skull with large round eyes and bared teeth, features that are typical in Taíno art. In profile, however, is visibly black and resembles the female figures with almond-shaped eyes, tight-lipped smiles and full breasts that the Yoruba sculpt in connection to Shango.

Soto's drawing can also be understood as an allegory of the Puerto Rican migration to New York and the birth of "Afro-Taíno" consciousness among his fellow artists in the Taller. In the artist's statement cited below, Soto describes the relationship between Puerto Rico and Africa as a "bondage of blood" that has enabled Puerto Ricans to claim kinship with African, Caribbean, Latin American and Native American peoples across the globe:



In Soto's drawing, the mingling between Native and African peoples is celebrated as the union of two great civilizations, but there is a social stigma attached to this the image. In Puerto Rico, a popular response to someone who claims to be racially pure is to pose the following question: *¿y tu abuela donde está?* The use of Santería aesthetics represents the artist's personal step of claiming ancestral legacies by bringing his grandmother's religious practices out of her closet. "I used to freak out every time I passed by my grandmother's room full of the Santería things she kept and the Santería rites she occasionally performed," recalled Soto.¹⁷ As an adult, Soto came to understand that African and African peoples were not only physically but psychologically oppressed by a culture that stigmatized their healing rituals as evil. "My so-called religious sense did not spring out of any religious inclination but out of my preoccupation with my own well-being, a preoccupation for the essence of a life with dignity, the essence of our being," stated Soto.¹⁸ "Africa has come to New York via the Caribbean." We New York Puerto Ricans always had botánicas where herbs and religious images were sold. When I use (religious) signs in my work I simply refer



that Homar depicted in the original ICP seal, the African holds a skull in his right hand and carries a rapier in the left to reflect his Kongo ancestry. Like the Kongo people, the Kongo people were brought to the Caribbean during the slave trade. Kongo spiritual beliefs are grounded in ancestor worship and aspects of their rituals survive in Haitian Voodoo, Cuban *Palo* and Puerto Rican *Espiritismo*.²⁵ In fact, the efficacy of Kongo rituals are so renowned in the Caribbean that Puerto Rican *Espiritismo*, which largely derives from the writings of the French spiritist Allan Kardec, recognizes an African spiritual guide known as “El Congo” who is called upon to locate dead relatives.²⁶

In Soto’s image, the African male becomes the only figure capable of linking the collective wisdom of Puerto Rico’s past heritages with the present. In this context, the skull and rapier refer to instruments used in Voodoo, Palo and *Espiritismo* ceremonies, all which involve contacting ancestors and spirits for guidance and retribution. The rapier may be pounded against a drum or the ground to wake up ancestors and is also used to create symbols that empower the spirits or record what they say.

foundations of seedlings, water rotted rainforest
pushed to hysterical insanity
by that loose backbone of ambivalence
like hunger sick hawks
building nests between stone mentalities
fighting the continuous turbulence of discovering self.³⁰

In interviews regarding the significance of Soto's work, artists and scholars as Esperanza Martell, Sandra María Esteves, Marcos Dimas and Juan Flores described Soto as a "deconstructionist." "The concept of laying bare is essential to his work—he was a deconstructor," stated Flores. "He was a surgeon of Puerto Rican/Nuyorican reality. He took people's clothes off, their skin off, he did surgical dissections on reality to get to the inner core of it and get underneath its facade."

However, Soto did more than deconstruct objects and their ideological implications in his works. Soto employed mythic figures to destroy myths that marginalized

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NOTES

¹ Holland Cotter, "A Neighborhood Nurtures Its Vibrant Cultural History," *New York Times* 16 March 1998, sec. E, 3.

² The author and artists acknowledge the exceptional contributions that Sherry Goldman and Lucy Lippard have made to Taller Boricua through their essays and lectures.

³ Jack Agüeros, "Foreword" in *The Drawings of Jorge Soto Sánchez*, ed., Cornell University Press, 1998.