



# Documents of 20th-century Latin American and Latino Art

A DIGITAL ARCHIVE AND PUBLICATIONS PROJECT AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

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**Juan Sánchez**

**Printed  
Convictions**

**Convicciones  
Grabadas**

**Prints and Related Works  
on Paper**

**Grabados y Obras en Papel**

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Alejandro Anreus, Ph.D.

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## Juan Sánchez Rican/Structs

In these times when bureaucracies censor art and the latest faddish decadence is proclaimed as art in the name of freedom, it is refreshing to encounter the work of Juan Sánchez. There is no doubt that Juan Sánchez is one of the most important Latino visual artists working in the United States. Yet, I will go even further, betting that Sánchez' work will have the permanence of a rock; that is, it will prevail.

Juan Sánchez was born in Brooklyn in 1954, to a working class Puerto Rican family, one of the many families who immigrated to the United States in search of a better life. Instead, they found that the American Dream was not reserved for the poor. Sánchez grew up in the barrios, where economic deprivations, poverty and violence are common. From an early age, his mother (possibly the most powerful influence in his life) gave him a profound and impassioned sense of his Puerto Rican identity.

Juan Sánchez attended Arts High in Manhattan. In 1977, he received his B.F.A. from Cooper Union and in 1980, his M.F.A. from the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Since his youth, Sánchez had been in contact with the activist group the Young Lords. He was also involved with the Taller Boricua in East Harlem. His development as a man and artist has always been within the social dialectic. By 1980, Sánchez already possessed his own visual vocabulary, and, since then, has used it to express the essence of his art: the liberation of Puerto Rico, the struggle against political oppression, and the spiritual and social emancipation of his people.

Sánchez is a mixed media painter. In his colorful and highly textured canvases, acrylics, grease pencils, oil sticks and photographs are intermixed. In addition, Sánchez has produced a substantial body of work on paper; not only in printmaking, but also in unique works. Since 1991 he has been making an impressive series on paper entitled *Rican/structs*. The term refers to a word invented by salsa musician Ray Barretto — meaning a recovery of the hidden histories of a people. Up to now, the series consists of some one hundred works, all of them on sheets of black paper which measure 16 x 20 inches. Several of these images will be published shortly in book form, together with poems by Puerto Rican authors.

Recently, I visited the artist's studio and was in awe of the consistent intensity of the *Rican/structs* pieces. My eyes were filled with flowers, crosses, Taino symbols, Puerto Rican flags, the warm figure of the

artist's mother, guns, fetuses, the serene face of Alma Villegas (Juan's wife), saints, the joyous figure of Liora (Juan and Alma's daughter), and the holy face of Don Pedro Albizu Campos. I decided to stop with greater detail in front of these *Rican/structs*, so that I may understand and interpret them better. Among several powerful images, I stopped to look at five.

The first image that I examined juxtaposes past and present identities of Puerto Ricans. A photo from the Puerto Rican Day Parade of an old man with a hat and *guayabera*, a folded flag resting on his arm, floats above a larger, inverted image. It is a detail from Ramón Frade's classic 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting *Our Daily Bread*, which depicts an old peasant wearing a hat, shirt and slacks, and walking barefoot down a hill, holding a bunch of green plantains. His thin face has been burned by the sun, his hands are wrinkled and callused from so much toil. The background is yellow ochre, like the earth itself. Sánchez contrasts the old peasant of yesteryear with the old man of today. Both are dignified, both are holding on to their identity in spite of the devastation of colonialism.

The second image is sober, almost all in black, gray and pieces of white. Throughout the entire rectangle, an image repeats itself twelve times; three military policemen are lifting and arresting an old woman. This old woman is the activist and poet Isabel Rosado, who since the age of twelve has been a member of the Nationalist movement. The incident, whose fragment we view, was a protest on the island of Vieques, across from the Marine base there. This was in 1979. We see the faces of two of the policemen; they have the cold, rigid faces of power. The face of Doña Isabel Rosado is a poem of resistance. Juan Sánchez has drawn hearts, each a different color, around the figure of Isabel Rosado. These are signs of love and admiration for this activist. In the middle of this composition, we find a leaf, brown, delicate, yet strong — a symbol of life. Sánchez pays homage to one of the heroines of the movement of Puerto Rican independence; the figures of de Burgos and Lebrón are united with the figure of Isabel Rosado, within the artist's pictorial repertoire.

Undoubtedly, the most virulent image that I contemplate is the third one. The black of the paper surrounds everything. A fetus is repeated six times on the top of the sheet. Over the six figures, Sánchez has drawn an enormous flower with yellow petals and a red center. Underneath this, a face is covered by the Puerto Rican flag, to the left of which are fingerprints. A piece of newspaper takes up the right of the sheet: "El Mundo, Sunday October 2, 1988/page 17/hispanic slain by police." Underneath, a photograph of a hand holding a

revolver, surrounded by advertisements; “Verticals,” “Kim’s Pizzas & Restaurant.” Our people are killed, die and their identities are lost among the ads. The consumer society consumes us. Facing it, one must paint a flower like a scream, one must protest against its nothingness. This is what Juan Sánchez does in this work.

Tenderness is the word that best describes the fourth of the *Rican/structions* that I examined. Behind a multi-colored background, hearts and flowers dance. On one side there is an icon of the Virgin with the child Jesus, together with two angels. On the other side, there is a color photograph taken by Juan Sánchez of his mother. We see what seems like a backyard with a chain-link fence and some plants. The artist’s mother is sitting wearing slippers. On one side of her there is an enormous dog, on the other a basin of water. Below this photo, there is another one, which shows us the artist when he was two or three years old. In this piece, we see Juan and his mother, Jesus and his mother; a tender tribute to the matriarchy, a subtle slap in the face of machismo.

The fifth *Rican/struction* which I confronted, is profoundly moving. Red rectangles on each corner form a green cross on the rest of the sheet. Across the paper, we see the images of the Christ of Limpías and Don Pedro Albizu Campos. The Christ of Limpías is in the middle of his passion, covered by a red cloth, the crown of thorns on his head. He is a victim of the Roman Empire and of the Sanhedrin. He is guilty of bringing the good news of God to the poor. He looks up to the heavens for the Father to give him strength. Don Pedro Albizu Campos (1891-1965) is sitting in a wheelchair. He rests his head on his left hand. Another hand touches his forehead, others cover him with the flag of his island. Albizu’s image is completely black and white, yet Sánchez has given the flag its colors: red, blue and white, colors of life and passion. He is at the end of his passion. We know that Don Pedro was a fervent Catholic. His religion was integral to his nationalism. It was a defiance to the imperialism of the United States. This image represents Albizu as a precursor of liberation theology — a spirituality that believes in the political liberation of the people of God. Sánchez unites Christ and Don Pedro (as he has done before in other works). They are both victims of empires, both revolutionaries whose example affects us today, tomorrow and always. This work crystallizes a faith that emancipates.

Juan Sánchez inserts himself in the tradition of socially engaged art of our America. He is brother to Orozco and Antonio Berni, as well as his compatriots, the printmakers Rafael Tufiño, Lorenzo Homar and José

Alicea. Above all, Sánchez is the esthetic offspring of the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century Puerto Rican painter, Francisco Oller. Like Oller, Sánchez believes in the noble utility of art, in its constructive space within human society.

In *Rican/structions*, like in all his work to date, Juan Sánchez reconstructs an identity fragmented by colonialism and its effects: injustice, misery, alienation and death. In these works on paper, this Puerto Rican artist reaffirms life and recovers the hidden histories of his people, both here and in the island, and through this recovery contributes to the spiritual and social revolution that many of us await.

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