MIXED BLESSINGS

NEW ART IN A MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

LUCY R. LIPPARD

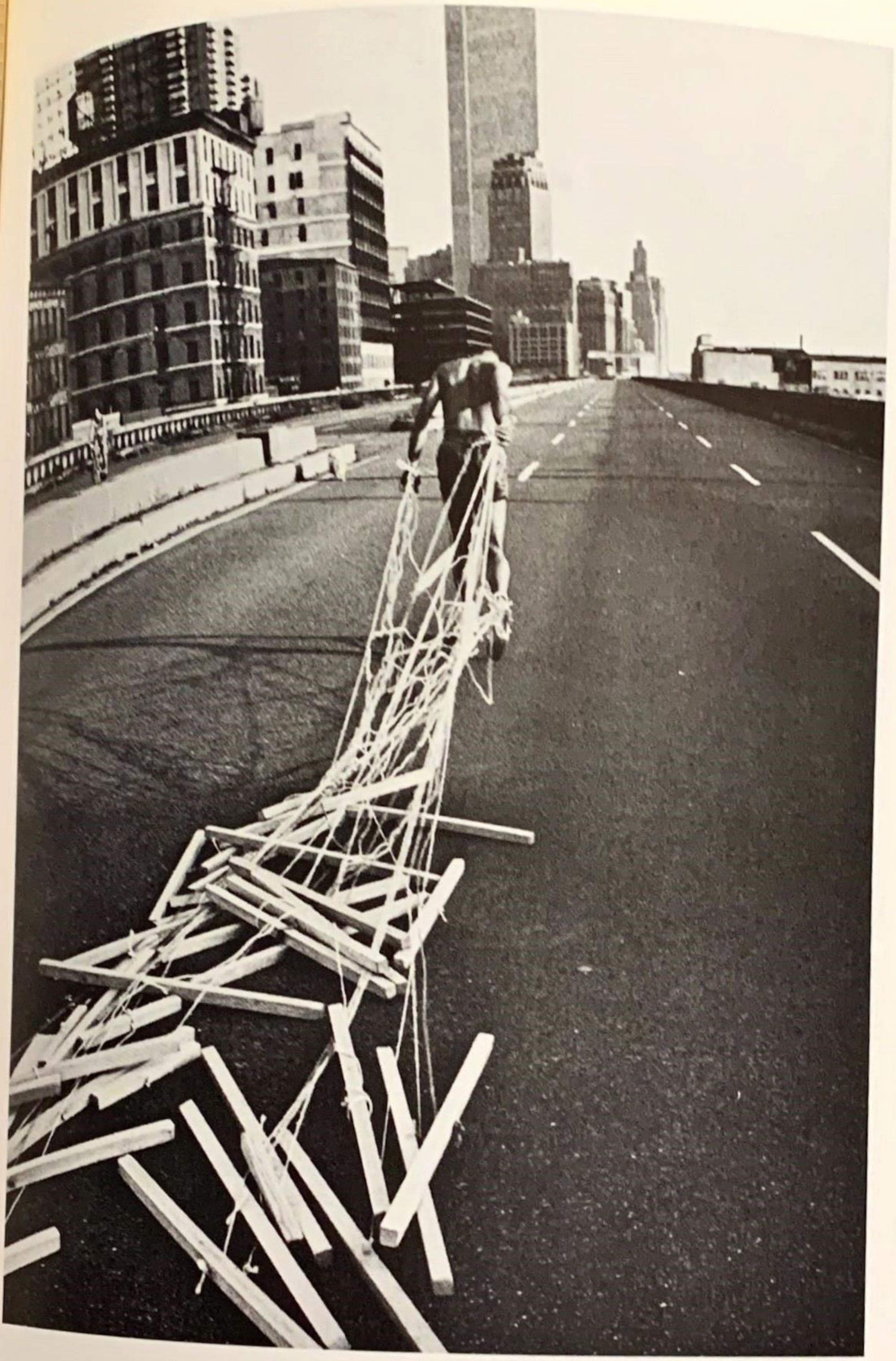

Fig. 21: Papo Colo, *Superman 51*, 1977, performance on the West Side Highway, New York. (Photo courtesy Exit Art, New York.) To express support for the Independence of Puerto Rico, Colo attached 51 sticks by ropes to his body and ran with them trailing after him until he collapsed from exhaustion. The number 51 referred to the possibility that Puerto Rico might become the fifty-first state: "Bound in ropes / premeditated act of defeat / a way Americans sometimes make sacrifices."

Colo was born Francisco Colon Quintero in Puerto Rico. He spent his youth as an adventurer, living with the Huichol and Cora Indians in Mexico and spending two years in the Merchant Marine. He calls himself a "transculturist" and disapproves of the "fetishistic" idiom of geographic identity that surfaces in much Latino art. In 1971, as a conceptual art piece, Colo forged his degree from the University of Puerto Rico, explaining that it was a "declaration of marginality of my own culture."

> Education, where the functions of colonial mentality are more sinister, creates a mirage about identity/culture/language/history, etc. By fabricating an exact copy of the document that symbolized that perversion . . . I fulfill the dream of so many underdeveloped people—to have an education. I do it with another mirage, with another lie, perhaps with more substance than the original.

(Quotations from letter to the author, 1986, and *Will, Power, & Desire: Papo Colo* [New York: Exit Art and Rosa Esman Gallery, 1986].)

Roche Rabell, who lives part-time in Chicago, evokes a poignant, brutal past that is fused with intense personal conflicts, conjuring ghosts of vanished indigenous peoples, and the history of the African Americans who replaced them, through an evocative rubbing technique.

The work of Juan Sánchez (plate 24) is an example of the kind of dialectical "interpresence of past and present" cited in the writings of Abdallah Laroui. Sánchez is an Afro–Puerto Rican firmly based in the NuYorican community, whose work moves across cultural frontiers without being a "crossover"—without giving anything up on the return trips. As subtitle for a series of prints,

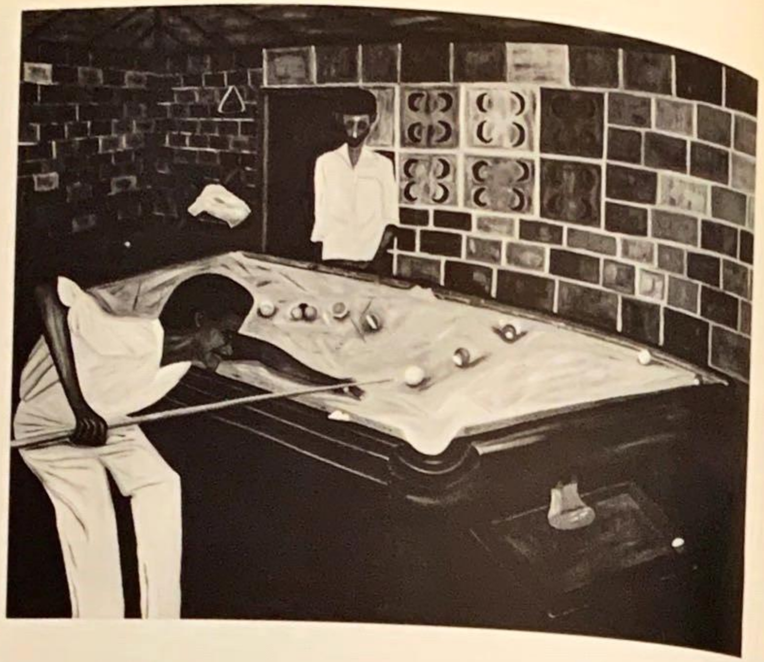

Fig. 22: Rafael Ferrer, *El Billar de Noche*, 1987, oil on canvas, 60" x 84". (Photo: Zindman/Fremont, courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York.) Ferrer's earlier work fell into "process" and then "neo-ritualist" categories, but recently he has rejected the modernist movements that he had adapted to the needs of a Latino exile, and returned to guileless scenes of Puerto Rican and Caribbean life such as this one.

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Puerto Rico has a particularly schizophrenic history, having been forceably reoriented in 1898 from Spanish to Yankee language and domination. A strong nationalist expression emerged in the '40s with the reformist government of Luis Muñoz Marín (who later lost his nerve and did not go as far as he had originally planned). The establishment by several North American New Dealers of the Division of Community Education played a role in cultural awareness. In 1952, when Puerto Rico officially graduated from colony to commonwealth status, a new optimistic burst of culture ensued. But it was only in the late '60s that international modernism seeped in, although even then the local strength remained a strong figurative and graphic tradition. Only in the '70s did abstraction belatedly display any force.

Such deliberate isolation from international trends is a double-edged sword, a delicate balance between an "esthetics of resistance"—enlightened, politically aware nationalism that maintains cultural identity—and a reactionary stance that fears both the folkloric "low" roots of much Caribbean culture and the international "high" avant-garde identified with dominant and dominating U.S. art. The failure in the '60s of Governor Luis Muñoz Marín's "Operation Bootstrap," which was to provide prosperity through "free" enterprise (i.e., U.S.-financed industrialization and exploitation) brought in a conservative pro-statehood government in 1968, and in Puerto Rico, as elsewhere in that period, art became political and explosive. The *independentista* movement and the disproportionate number of Puerto Ricans serving and dying in Vietnam were among the sparks.

—based on Mari Carmen Ramírez, *Puerto Rican Painting Between Past and Present* (Washington, D.C.: Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, 1987)

he borrowed the phrase "Rican/struction" from the salsa percussionist Ray Barretto, because what he does in his art is restructure a colonized reality by photographing it, painting it, writing it, tearing it up, and rearranging it to reflect a different reality. One of his paintings includes the inscription: "Tito, born Puerto Rican, died New Yorican . . . please give respect to Tito because even if he's americanized . . . there was some culture and conscience left to at least keep the word Rican as a surname."

While some Latino artists boil bitterly, if justifiably, in isolation, or aspire to cultural forgetfulness, and while some non-Latino artists either admiringly or callously borrow from the energies of Latin culture, Sánchez has all along been totally unselfconscious about where he comes from. Still living in Brooklyn, where he was born and raised, invigorated by his communal base in the Latino and progressive art communities, and unafraid of politics, emotion, or sentiment, he takes the "risk" of bringing them into his art, which is permeated by the traditional values of family and religion. The rose, the cross, the Puerto Rican flag, and street graffiti are frequent motifs, as is the artist's late mother, a poor, often ill, working woman whom he much admired. In one painting she is sheltered by a rainbow. In another she appears with a botanica doll like those she once made. The titles of two other works by her son are: *Never saw her as an oppressed Puerto Rican Woman . . . Only as Mommy* and *Lord, find me a role where my love can live in struggle.* In *La Lucha Continua* a little girl's first communion is joined with the ongoing political struggle; a collaged devotional card represents San Martin de Porre, a popular patron of the poor usually pictured with a broom, a kind of spiritual janitor. At the other end of the spectrum, political art clichés like barbed wire and the Puerto Rican independence flag take on new resonance because of the many-layered context in which they are placed.

Confronting the fragmentation of his culture by imperialism and dispersion, Sánchez lovingly weaves his fragments into a new fabric that is both spiritually restorative and politically radical. The patches in his quiltlike paintings (or comforters) are words, photos he takes himself, quotations and images that recall homely, proud, and rebellious moments from the distant and recent pasts of Boriquén (the indigenous name for the Island). He mourns the sterilization of one third of the women living in Puerto Rico, the number of Puerto

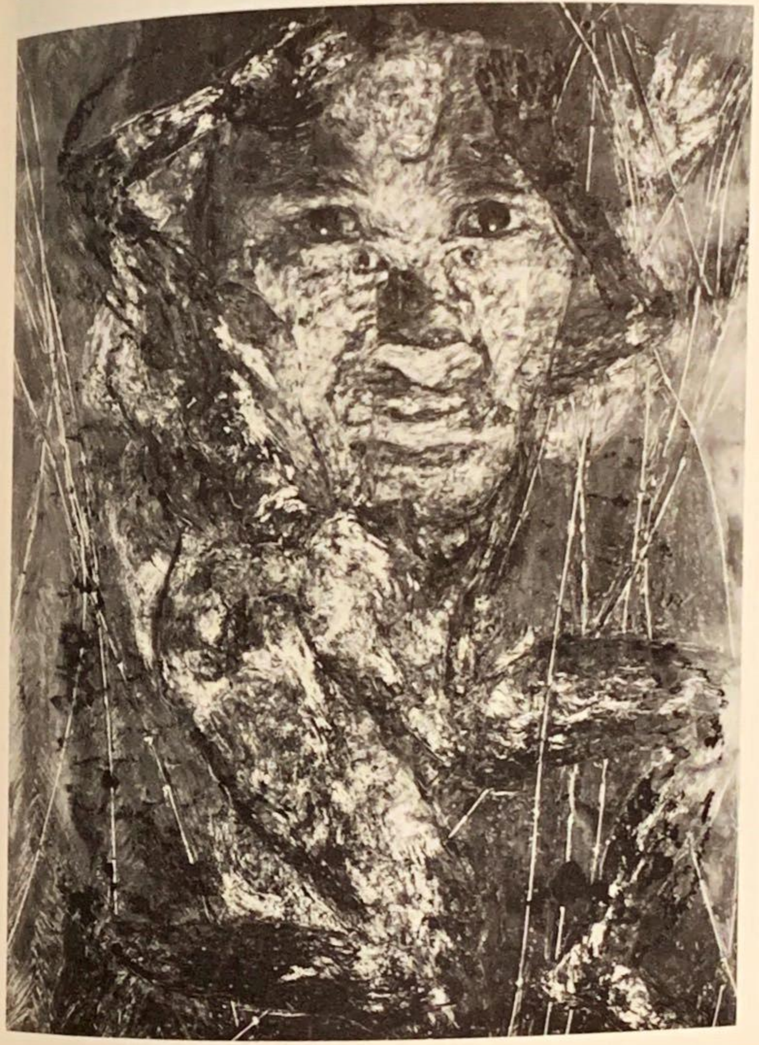

Fig. 23: Arnaldo Roche Rabell, *Now You Know How I Feel*, 1985, oil crayons on gesso paper, 66" x 50" (Photo courtesy Galeria Botello, Hato Rey, Puerto Rico.) At least two, perhaps three figures, painted black and white, but all with African features, are superimposed or merged in this poignant image of conflicting identities. The large head (a self-portrait) with two pairs of eyes seems to loom behind the kneeling figure, which has two pairs of arms. The larger eyes gaze at the viewer with an unavoidable stare. Tense, haunting, and confrontational, the drawing supports Mari Carmen Ramírez's contention that Roche's subjects are "usually violent dreams or visions that he has experienced intensely" and that he paints to exorcise these "monstrous events"—a metaphor implying Puerto Rico's social history. Roche lives part-time in Chicago, where he received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute.

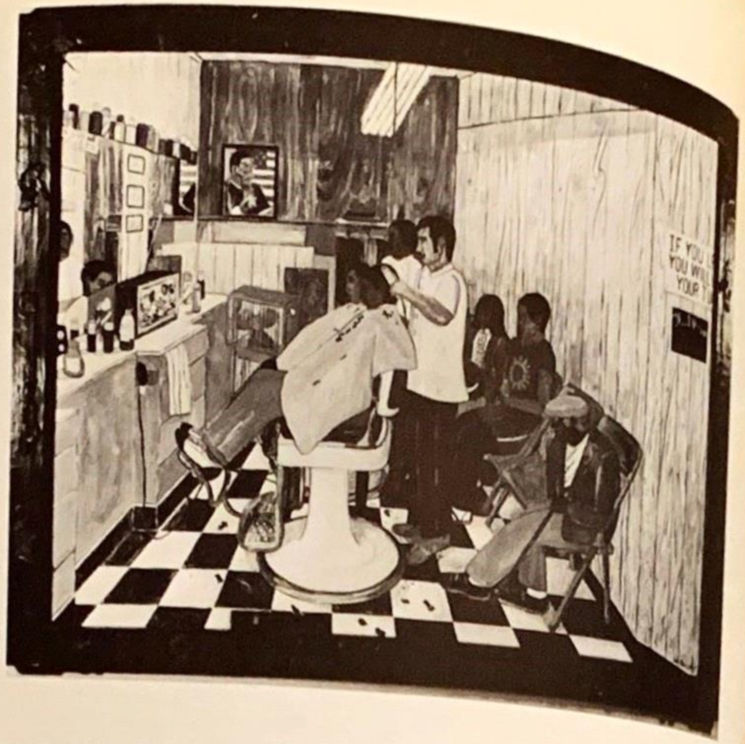

Fig. 24: Willie Birch, *Reminiscing about Jackie Robinson*, 1987, gouache on paper with relief frame, 54" x 42". Birch is an African American painter and sculptor born in New Orleans, living in Brooklyn, and teaching at Hunter College. His "Personal View of Urban America" (the title of this series) calls on African roots, black history, and untrained southern artists. In his poetic sculptures, such as the large wooden site sculpture in Fort Greene Park titled *For Old Bones and Southern Memories*, Birch often uses earth, wood, and cemetery references, but his paintings are oriented to the urban present. They are lively, if often depressing, chronicles of street life in "the ghetto," with subjects ranging from high school graduation to break dancers, drug busts, the local barbershop, or "Playland" (kids playing ball and riding bikes before a wall graffitied with memorials to dead friends). "I want to force the viewer to see not only 'America the Beautiful' but also . . . the forgotten America that suffers from premeditated as well as unintentional neglect" (*Loaded*, n.p.)

Rican political prisoners held in U.S. jails, brutality and intimidation on the U.S. military base at Vieques. His sources include the heroes and heroines of Puerto Rican history, the churches where solace from poverty and racism is sought, the community organizations where the seeds of a broader resistance are planted, the Afro-Latino botanicas where the medicines associated with religions like Santería are bought.

He also uses petroglyph images from the caves and stone steles of the Taino (a peaceful Arawak people who inhabited the Antilles and mostly disappeared under colonization; 300,000 were extinguished by Columbus). Paying homage to the beneficent Taino god Yu-cahu Bagua Maorocoti, he simultaneously makes the connection to urban graffiti and popular culture. He ironically juxtaposes ancient images with, say, the eternally youthful pop group Menudo (the concocted culture heroes of deculturated Puerto Rican teenagers adrift in the Northland), or he combines a Taino fertility goddess with an homage to Pedro Albizu Campos—the nationalist hero and longtime political prisoner in the United States—honoring an uprising in the town of Jayuya in 1950. In the process he is telling history.

The layering of Sánchez's work is reflected in his technique. Walter Benjamin said, "the painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web."[40] Sánchez does both, embedding his own photographs in his paintings. He incorporates long texts, like a conceptual artist. But the subtleties of his messages are more likely to be lost on supposedly sophisticated art audiences than on uneducated Latino audiences familiar with his cultural references. As much or more powerfully than most postmodernists, Sánchez takes on the issue of representation by replacing stereotypes of urban Latino people with images of people as they see themselves. The richness of his color, surfaces, and textures constitutes an homage to his subjects. It is not the opulence of wealth, but of popular culture.

African American Willie Birch and Chinese American Martin Wong also celebrate the diversity, vitality, and tragedies of New York's poor neighborhoods. Birch looks at Brooklyn's local culture—barbershop camaraderie, high school graduation, graffiti, and drug busts—with a loving but unflinching eye and a quasi-naive style. In his portraits of place, Wong (plate 32) unites an Asian-derived joy in the decorative with a gritty Western paint surface to depict his Lower East Side neighborhood—a multicultural world of lovingly detailed brick walls, vacant tenements, skateboarders, firemen, drug addicts, and poets. They live with a vehement and often joyful desperation beneath skies of mapped constellations and lyrical messages written by hands in deaf sign language, endowing everyday realities with a glimpse of the distant sublime. As John Yau writes, Wong has transformed his displacement "into an expressive choice," a deep desire "to both record an emerging cultural identity as well as invent one which is hybrid and relational."[41]

The contrasting threads of longing and loss, desire and displacement, are woven through the art of many Asian Americans, who are far from their ancestral lands and whose histories of dislocation are many and varied. At the same time that Latino and African Americans are resurrecting religious motifs in high art, and the visual richness of their heritage is attracting those unfamiliar with it, one hears frequent observations about how the white West is moving toward the East in the spiritual realm (often by way of New Age ripoffs of Native American traditions). In modernist art, this is nothing new, given the work of Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, and others in the '40s and '50s, and the influence of Asian art on Europeans from Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism. Today, however, it is Asian Americans themselves who are turning back to see what was left behind, not only in history, but in their childhoods or in the present lives of relatives in the homelands or the Chinatowns or Japantowns of this country. In doing so, they are producing art that bears only superficial stylistic resemblances either to their own traditional arts or to earlier Western borrowings from the East. As recent arrival Hung Liu puts it, "All in all, I am trying to invent a way of allowing myself to practice as a Chinese artist outside of Chinese culture. Perhaps the displaced meanings of that practice—reframed within this culture—are meaningful *because* they are displaced."[42]

It is inevitably controversial to try and pin down the elusive cultural characteristics in any artist's work. But since they are almost always assumed,

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For this Western-trained, third generation Asian American, curating an exhibition of Japanese-born sculptors raised unexpected issues. Initially, I believed that these artists were informed by Western formal ideas and used abstract or symbolic modes, reminiscent of well-established trends in contemporary American art, to similar ends. However, in preparatory interviews, they revealed distinctive sensibilities primarily derived from non-Western conceptual frameworks. Although Japan has a long history of acceptive foreign forms, critics and curators should not automatically assume that such appropriation transmits intercultural filters intact! In fact, any cross-cultural transmission assures that meaning and purpose will alter for those informed by distinctly different cultures.

—Margo Machida, *Crossed Cultures* (Brooklyn: The Rotunda Gallery, 1989, n.p.)