

FREEDOM

WITHIN

Paintings By JUAN SANCHEZ/Installation By ALFREDO JAAR

FREEDOM WITHIN

Brazilian photographer Beatriz Schiller recently said that, "In Latin America an artist stands for resistance in people's minds. Here in the United States, I think an artist stands for, and often looks for, acceptance. In every aspect of U.S. life there is an underlying motivation of mass acceptance, of trying to please, that leads to less freedom. In Latin America there is censorship; here there is self-censorship. What is essential for an artist is intellectual freedom within..."

Alfredo Jaar and Juan Sanchez are two Latin American artists who strive for, utilize, and celebrate that intellectual freedom within. In their very different ways, Jaar and Sanchez each engage the political realities of their situation as artists living in the U.S., specifically New York, while their respective countries are adversely effected by actions and policies of the U.S. government. Neither Jaar nor Sanchez are ashamed of their passion for truth, integrity, and communication. Each has said that communication is one of the most important aspects of his work as an artist. Each has taken resistance as an integral part of art work, wherein political commitment is not a new "trend" in art but is a natural and necessary component of life.

In one way, the differences in style and approach between these two artists can be seen as a reflection of their different nationalities: Alfredo Jaar is Chilean, Juan Sanchez is Puerto Rican. But in a more important and more profound way, these two artists search from within and without for highly individualized and specific engagement with their art and the public. In that sense their works are more related than they are different.



Juan Sanchez
Para Julia de Burgos II, 1985 (detail)
 Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 66"

"All art is political. All art, because of its nature, defines its audience. For example, if you have an exhibit of abstract art you have to take into account that there is only a sector of the population that appreciates abstract art. You have to take into account the fact that abstract art does not have a direct link to political statement-making — and that in itself is a political statement." Juan Sanchez

Juan Sanchez is an ardent Puerto Rican nationalist who grew up in the Brooklyn ghettos. He has an acute sense of continuing Puerto Rican history and struggle and a finely-tuned rage toward U.S. colonization of his homeland. In his own writing he makes no separation between Puerto Rican history and Puerto Rican art. He makes every possible connection, even connecting the planting of a seed by the Puerto Rican patriot Pedro Albizu Campos to performance art and also to Taino and African rituals.

Sanchez feels that the U.S. tries to annihilate Puerto Rican culture. For him, the facts are unarguable: more than one-third of all Puerto Rican women of child-bearing age were sterilized by the U.S. government, and almost half of the population has been forced to live in the U.S. because of such factors on the Island as more than 20% unemployment, two-thirds of the population living below the poverty level, and 60% forced to rely on food stamps. Puerto Rico imports 90% of its food while 13% of its arable land is controlled by the U.S. military. Pharmaceutical corporations despoil water and air. The 20/20 Plan calls for the stripmining of the mineral riches of the Island and its conversion into a nuclear park. For years English was the only language taught in schools, and even today most textbooks are in English. The U.S. makes a great profit from these acts; fully one-tenth of all U.S. profits from overseas investments come from this small island country.

Juan Sanchez is a part of the resistance to this situation, which the United Nations Committee on De-colonization has officially declared an illegal colonization by the U.S. That resistance is itself part of a longer history of resistance to foreign invasion and domination that began with the Taino Indians. Sanchez has said, "Political art is a medium used as a weapon to hopefully recapture or regain the positive energy of celebration — to regain the goodness of humanity."

His resistance is not sour — not rhetoric — it is a positive force seen clearly in his paintings. He utilizes well the various layers of Puerto Rican history and visually, almost tactile-ly, connects them to the everyday reality of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. He uses the layers of posters, graffiti, and pronouncements found on every available space in the barrios as an effective metaphor and reclaims the energy that they echo.

His work titled "Jayua: Past and Present" (1984), is an excellent but typical example of his use of the technique of historical and visual layers. The painting is a mixture of oil, acrylic, photo, and other media that "recaptures" the visual space of the barrio with strong celebratory colors. The tactile textures combine to place photos, posters, and the colors in a continuum that fuses the Taino resistance with that of the barrio. In that context the overt political statement about the 1950 insurrection in Jayuya, which was brutally smashed by the U.S. Army, becomes a cry of revolution exactly like the "Grito de Lares" in the 19th century and the cry of Jayuya itself.

Juan Sanchez doesn't pull any punches. He does not let the past swallow the present. He has included in his works every Puerto Rican patriot, from Julia de Burgos to William Morales to Angel Rodriguez Cristobal, who was imprisoned, tortured, and killed in a Florida prison in 1979 because of his participation in a demonstration against the U.S. Navy on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. But always his paintings balance rage portrayed with the vibrant colors, flowers, and rainbows of a directed hope. His use of form and color draw us to the message.

There is a mastery in Sanchez's work that can come only from the integrity of mastering artistic technique for more important purposes. As he says, "I feel that artists are responsible human beings. That responsibility has a part to play in our art and personal life."

It is a terrible irony that New York, the financial heart of the U.S. government and its corporations, which have so great an effect on the lives of South Americans, is now the second home of so many of them. That irony is not lost on Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. He is properly obsessed with the mythologizing and manipulation of the press and broadcasting. "My work re-examines the collective memory of the South American people in the light of my individual experience from the United States, that is, seventh row center."

Jaar's work is energetic, innovative, and, most of all, thought-probing. His installations have sometimes been called conceptual, but they are finely planned aesthetically, with a great deal of care and respect for the audience. It might better be called semiological art. Jaar is concerned with audience response as part of the work of art and seeks to involve those people who are not part of the mainstream art world. In his words, "Art is communication. That does not mean that one only gives a message through art, but also that the audience must receive it and answer. If the audience does not answer there is no communication."

Jaar has stated that one of his primary interests is in the power and influence the media has over our lives; in how the media translates facts into news and images. The media creates a world of fiction, and its images are then perceived as reality. He has said that he is presently concerned with how the news media describes itself and how it talks about politics and social concerns.

He does not think of himself as a political artist and fights the whole limiting — and to him ideological — idea of labels. Like most Latin Americans he seems to feel that social engagement is more natural than special and that any work or profession has political connotations. He may have a more particular insight into this than most artists because Jaar works fulltime as an architect and graphic designer.

His installations use graphic design extensively, but he also uses the use, the public iconography, of graphic design and its public artifacts, such as neon signs, signs, and posters as phenomena, words, and words-in-conjunction-with-images, which to Jaar are always ideological. He employs anything that is part of the public media domain, such as video, but deliberately excludes the private or individualistic contributions that the established artworld prizes so much.

Perhaps one of the things most distinctive about Jaar's work is an acute intelligence and urbanity that is more than a match for the jumble of consumer-packaged mis-information systems he tackles with such energy that he has been called both "generous and poetic" and "chaotic." He employs his wit and his clarity with such an edge that we must "answer" his messages about messages whether we want to or not.

He described a work he had done in Chile in the '70s, wherein he used the outward form of a journalist in the street: "I did some surveys about Happiness, as part of a larger project called Studies about Happiness. The work lasted two years and included, among other things, polls, photographs, video, and transcripts of one hundred interviews of happy and unhappy people. I even used large billboards to ask my question, 'Are You Happy?', and offered an installation in the museum where anyone could go and respond. More than a thousand people participated in this project."

In the U.S., he says, that would not work because people are too cool. It is a country where one must try to make people participate. That is a key for entering Alfredo Jaar's work.

Juan Sanchez and Alfredo Jaar approach art and their audiences differently. Sanchez, living in a city with hundreds of thousands of his oppressed countrymen, may see his art as primarily for them. Jaar, whose fellow exiles are scattered all over the world, sees his primary audience as the people around him — the "typical Americans." Both produce art that is socially engaged and that is, each in its own way, essentially Latin American in spirit and universal in effect.

Alfredo Jaar sums up well with his answer to someone's question, "Do you miss Chile?" "No. Not the Chile that I know. What I miss is Latin America, the Latin America that could be, that should be."

Maria Thereza Alves
Guest Curator
Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1985

Maria Thereza Alves, born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, is an artist and writer presently living in New York. She founded the Brazilian Information Center and was recently awarded the Academy of American Poets Prize at the Cooper Union where she earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. She has also been awarded a fellowship for younger poets at Bucknell University. Her participation in helping coordinate *Artist Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America* led her to co-curate *MYTH & HISTORY: Central American Art Today* at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in New York, 1985.



Alfredo Jaar
Untitled, 1983
Installation (detail), 96 x 192 x 96"