

Mario Sanchez

The Great Key West Folk Artist
Interview for Paul Collins painting by Alma Bond

I interviewed Mario Sanchez to try to understand what makes him the great folk artist of Key West. I hoped for a tiny glint into the hallowed halls of creativity.

“You impress me as a happy person, Mario,” I began in his “Studio Under the Trees”, the tiny shaded shed beneath a tree where he does his work in Key West. “Can you give me some idea of what makes you happy?”

“I like to mix with people,” he answered. “Everybody knows me. I have no enemies. I've been very fortunate. Eighty to ninety percent of the people like the little stuff I do.” Later I asked his brother Perucho what he thought accounted for Mario's success. “He's just lucky,” Perucho answered. Mario nodded his head in agreement. “Tell me Mario,” I continued, “What kind of little boy were you?”

“Just like every other little boy,” he answered. “We were mischief makers, but never did anything to harm people. We climbed trees and stole Spanish lime, things like that, but never hurt any old people like some boys did.”

He said he was interested in wood carving from the time he was a child, when he used to whittle scraps of driftwood he picked up on the beach.

“When did you start the carving seriously?” I asked.

“When I was 22 I began to carve fish on small pieces of board. Nobody taught me how to carve. I just began to do it. People started liking them. I used to give them away.” Then his mother-in-law, whom he loved, suggested he carved and painted scenes of old Key West as he remembered them. “So I did.”

Mario said he paints “the pictures in his head”- unbelievably vivid images of the city of his childhood that he remembers in perfect detail. He portrays a world of obsolete customs and vanished landmarks- unpainted houses, the Gato Cigar Factory, the old City Hall, the old and colorful Clyde-Mallory Dock, the Cuban Club, the original Fausto's food market, the old convent of Mary Immaculate, Voodoo dancers on parade, long gone stores like Charlie Thompson's Marine Hardware and Alfredo's, the “Home of the Cuban Sandwich” and the old movie theater, the Palace, complete with signs. He remembers the signposts on the street corners, the long departed “Pee-roo-lee Man” so beloved of children around the turn of the

century, the parades in the street, the horse pulling the Chicken Alley Ice Cream wagon, the silent yet festive air of the black funeral procession.

“I have a photographic memory,” he explained. “There have been many changes in Key West since I was a boy. I paint the Key West I remember.” These “pictures in his head” are called eidetic images. They are particularly vivid type of imagery that seems as if the person were actually perceiving what he pictures, although he realizes that the imagined object is not literally present. People differ in the clarity and the intensity with which they can reconstruct an original image. It is very common in childhood and is gradually lost by most adults, who generally are unable to form a faithful copy of the early memory in their minds. The few who possess this ability are believed to be endowed with a special talent.

Why does this psychologically healthy man continued to see “pictures in his head” at a time long after other adults have given them up? Since it is known that Mario's mother also remembered Key West in perfect detail, we may assume, at least in part, that this is genetic. Her memory may even have been better than his. It is said that when he forgot a detail of old Key West, he would consult his mother about it.

Undoubtedly, he has a unique talent. But in all likelihood, something else is at work too. I believe he has a need so compelling that it enables him to retain a brain function most of us have long outgrown. As is probably always the case with successful artists, the creativity of Mario Sanchez is fed by both psychological and genetic factors, in this case leading to his incredible gift of eidetic imagery.

A nostalgic aura appears to permeate his life and work. It seemed characterized by his attempt to relive his childhood, as he carves and paints the scenes he remembers. He was born in the Cuban neighborhood of Gato Village on the corner of Duval and Louisa Streets, where he still lives and works most of the year in the backyard of his mother's old house. According to Mario, he had everything he needed then. He still uses simple chisels and paints his carvings with dime store brushes and bright colors he mixes with castor oil. “The smell brings back memories of childhood,” he says. His very worktable rests upon the base of an old sewing machine which was owned by his mother, Rosa.

Also telling is the fact that he re-creates the same things over and over. For example he has painted the funeral procession innumerable times. No matter what he is offered, Sanchez refuses to paint a scene that is historically incorrect. “You just can't invent history,” he says. But I suspect that if he can't “see it in his head.” he is unable to construct the picture.

Mario and his friends are very unhappy about civilization today. According to his profile called "1991 Folk Artist of the Year" in the Florida Keys magazine of March, 1992, they believe that something has gone wrong in this country. Mario said, "We want somebody to fix what has gone wrong. We love this country. Many of us served in the Armed Forces. We don't understand why it went wrong." He also has been known to say that all the people in the world are one race, the human race. With this philosophy, he is very troubled, indeed, by the racism that is rampant in our times.

Mario's pictures tell the story of nostalgia, quieter days when people of all races and economic means shared neighborhoods peacefully. So long as he lives in his work, Mario is able to fix "what went wrong." He doesn't have to grow old, he doesn't have to lose those he loves, he doesn't have to face the racism, violence, homelessness, AIDS- the frightening changes in time. I suspect that in this simple, honest man lies a yearning so deep it bypasses the normal numbing of the senses and erupts into his work. It is a longing for times past, for those he loved who are gone, and perhaps, most of all, for his beloved mother. In the healthiest possible manner, the creative one, Mario makes his dreams come true.

This yearning became apparent to me when Mario offered to show me the graves of his ancestors in the Key West Cemetery. Mario, Perucho and I silently drove through the narrow roads of the old cemetery where I took a photograph of Mario and Perucho at the gravesite of their mother. Mario looked deeply distressed.

By wielding his knife and his brush in the service of his dreams, Mario Sanchez can blot out the vision of his mother's grave. He can forever remain a carefree boy who "had everything he needed" on the beloved streets of Key West, where no one grows old, no one dies, and black and white, rich and poor play happily side by side.