

Stumbling Upon EL GRAN TOUR by Lorie Caval



Curator, Gladys Peña-Acosta showing us the *HOMENAJE: Jorge Soto Sánchez* exhibit at the Longwood Gallery at Hostos College, during El Gran Tour.

Recently I received a random email with some information that looked really interesting to me. It was an invitation that wrote: "In honor of Puerto Rican Heritage Month, The New York Regional Office of the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration in collaboration with The Puerto Rican Creative Network, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer invite you to accompany us on the first annual 'El Gran Tour: Experiencing Puerto Rican Visual Artists' Artworks and Spaces.'" I didn't know exactly what to expect, but it sounded like it would be right up my alley, so I RSVP'd right away!

El Gran Tour took place on Sunday, November 15th, starting out with a breakfast at the Metropolitan Museum at 9am. Having to wake up that early on a Sunday was certainly a test of my commitment to attending this event - I even arrived ten minutes early! Actually, lots of folks did; after waiting for a while in the lobby, we were ushered in to a room for a catered continental breakfast. It was a very welcoming environment, people mingled and it seemed to be a mix of arts and museum officials, artists, art-lovers, college students and local politicians. After a while Brenda Torres of the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration addressed the room to explain what we were there for. As it turns out, this was the very first of El Gran Tours which they envision becoming an ongoing annual event - created by the Puerto Rican Creative Network, which is also just in the process of forming. So we were all in on the ground floor together. From there, we were addressed by a number of people who were involved in the creation of El Gran Tour, including Manhattan Borough President, Gale Brewer and Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez who said a few words about the impact of Puerto Rican art and culture in New York, and touched on the current economic crisis going on in Puerto Rico. Representatives of the arts organizations participating on El Gran Tour spoke: Libertad Guerra from Loisaida Center, Miguel Trellis from the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center, John MacElwee from the Hostos Center for Arts and Culture and Nitza Tufiño from Taller Boriqua. As well, Richard Aste from Brooklyn Museum made a presentation on the current exhibition which he curated, *Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World* - being that we would not be visiting there on El Gran Tour, but this show is important/relevant nonetheless.

We participants had a choice, either to go on the Uptown and Bronx tour (featuring Taller Boriqua, Longwood Gallery at Hostos and Wallworks Gallery) or on the Downtown and Brooklyn tour (featuring Loisaida Center, Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center and BRIC House). Being a native New Yorker myself, I thought it was a great opportunity to be like a tourist in my own city, to see some familiar things through new eyes, so to speak. I chose to go on the Uptown/Bronx tour (because quite frankly, I was already familiar with the downtown venues). As a special treat, some of us got to ride in a trolley (I thought it was pretty cute)! What was especially nice was that Gladys Peña-Acosta (who curated the show we were going to see at Hostos) stood at the helm of the trolley and used the microphone to give us even more background information. (I am a nerd, so this was like icing in the cake for me.)

Our first stop was at [Taller Boriqua](#) in East Harlem where we met with Luis R Cancel, curator of their current photo exhibit, *Paulo Fabre — Pé Direito*. Then one of their resident artists, Marcos Dimas, showed us around his studio. Next, another resident artist, Nitzia Tufiño, welcomed us in to her painting studio. She took the time to explain two of the large-scale pieces that she was in the process of working on - both of which I thought were lovely, her style really spoke to me. One was an endearing portrait of her mother and father the other, an image taken from a photo of Francisco Oller with his Parisian contemporaries, including Cezanne, called "The Conversation." After that we all ran across the road to the Raphael Tufiño Printmaking Workshop where artists demonstrated how they actually make linoleum-cut prints.

We boarded into our trolley again and headed up to the Bronx where we met with John MacElwee at the [Longwood Gallery at Hostos College](#). Gladys Peña-Acosta gave us a heartfelt tour of the retrospective she curated there: *HOMENAJE: Jorge Soto Sánchez*. I was impressed by this vast array of work - from painting to prints and mixed media, which was pieced together by borrowing works from friends and family, which have not been displayed since his death in 1987. The centerpiece of the show is "El Velorio" which Soto made after Oller's classic painting of the same name. (Somehow Oller keeps popping up all over the place!) Considering that Soto was creating this art in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it would seem to me that he was one of the creators of neo-expressionism, however, unsung. After that, MacElwee showed us around the lobby where artist Antonio Martorell has done a colorful mixed-media installation. This was a treat for me to see, because I had the pleasure of meeting Martorell last summer in his studio in Puerto Rico, and seeing a great array of his work there.

After viewing all of that amazing art, we all seemed to be running out of steam. But the tour organizers were one step ahead of us - they provided boxed lunches on the trolley! (At this point I could not believe how well-organized this whole thing was, and oh - did I mention it was totally free?!) So we were off to our next location: [WallWorks Gallery](#) where we first viewed some murals outside, before going in to see their current show, *Three the Hard Way: Joe Conzo, Joe Russo and Leanna Valente, featuring black and white photos from the heyday of hip-hop*.

At this point it was getting late and even the trolley driver had gone home. Not to worry, we boarded on to the other bus that was waiting outside of WallWorks to bring us to the after-party at [BRIC House](#) in Brooklyn. Once there, we were very lucky to find the artist whose work is currently being featured there, Juan Sánchez, who along with curator Elizabeth Ferrer, introduced us to the show, *¿What's The Meaning of This?* I must say that I was blown away. I was not previously familiar with Sánchez's work, but I became an immediate fan. I even asked him to sign my exhibition catalog. (Did I mention that I am a nerd?) There were about 30 incredible multi-media paintings on display and a couple of video pieces, one of which I was completely hypnotized by, "Unknown Boriqua, a Nuyoric State of Mind."

After that, we all got to nibble on snacks, drink a little wine and mingle in the gallery at BRIC. El Gran Tour, indeed! Moral of the story: read those random email invitations - you never know where they may lead you.

(For more art photos, goto my Instagram: [@whippedhoney](#).)