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Reflections of Puerto Rico

Paintings by Oscar Martinez recall his island childhood

BY LARA JACKSON
 CONTRIBUTOR

Oscar Martinez's life as an oil painter began in a rather unlikely way -- as a medical artist. He worked for a time at that occupation, illustrating surgical procedures and textbooks, and learned much about the human body, but his heart was really in the art.

The Oak Park resident was recently mentioned in the textbook, "Puerto Rican Americans" by Nichol Bryan. Martinez is named in the chapter entitled "Role Models" along with celebrities such as Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez and the late, great, baseball player Roberto Clemente.

He also was listed in "Who's Who in America" in 1990.

Martinez' artwork, in his own words, "is about the mystery of the mind, the revelations found in dreams and the ever present and elusive perception of what we call reality."

Martinez's paintings are a vibrant reminder of his hometown -- Maraguez, Puerto Rico -- which was rich with "folklore, myth, spirituality and beauty." His paintings serve as a way to keep his childhood memories alive of his grandmother's singing and his grandfather's violin playing. The memory of his aunts' many conversations about the spirits and myths concerning the river that flowed by his home, still fascinate him. Martinez can never return to his beloved Maraguez because a dam broke and the town flooded, but through his paintings he will never forget this town he called home until the age of 14.

Martinez's love for the human figure defines them as he creates stories and develops a sense of mystery in his paintings. He challenges the viewer to

discover what is and is not in his painting -- reality is many different things to different people.

Well-respected in the arts community, Martinez has also achieved much in the Latino community. He was the president emeritus of the Latino Institute and the president and a board member of the Chicago Library's Art Collection Selection Committee. Martinez also was appointed to the Illinois Arts Council by former Governor James Thompson and served as the chairman of Media Arts, a member of the Legislation Committee and a member of the Sculpture Chicago committee. He was also a juror on the architecture and design committee for the Harold Washington Library.

Martinez holds a bachelor of science degree in medical art and communications from the University of Illinois at the Medical Center in Chicago. He was the curator of the Anatomy Museum at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Martinez moved on to work for the College of Dentistry at the University of Illinois at Chicago as an assistant, then an associate director, where he stayed for 20 years. In this position, he focused on program development as well as designed and wrote, recruitment materials.

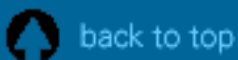
Still, it is Martinez's artwork that sets him apart and for which he has received much recognition. He began his career as an artist painting murals, which he still does because he enjoys painting large pieces of artwork. His murals have been mentioned in several publications, including "Chicago Murals: An Historical Guide" (University of Chicago Press) by Mary L. Gray.

Martinez's most recent exhibitions have been "Haciendo Patria" at the Collage Fine Arts Gallery in Chicago and "Remembrance" at the Oak Park Art League.

Martinez has been hired to paint a mural for the Aurora Public Art Commission Gallery I and he is also working on the restoration of a mural at the Latino Cultural Center. In the past, he has received mural commissions by the Chicago Mural Group and the Humboldt Park YMCA.

The artist's next endeavor will be a presentation in October on "Diversity and Art" at the Hewitt Company in Chicago.

For more information on Oscar Martinez and his artwork visit his Web site at www.oscarmartinez.com.



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