

# GALLERY & STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

## Manzano's America

It is always gratifying to see an artist whose work we have championed in these pages gain greater recognition, and this is especially true in the case of Raúl Manzano, whose solo exhibition "Evolving Symbols of America 2000," was featured in October at The Paterson Museum, 2 Market Street, Paterson, New Jersey.

Manzano, who is the President and one of the guiding lights of the West Side Arts Coalition, practices a kind of unadorned figuration reminiscent in its clarity and narrative quality of Rene Magritte. Manzano, however, combines a subtle surrealism with elements of Pop and social commentary in a way that makes his oils on canvas quite unique.

One of the primary motifs of Manzano's show at The Paterson Museum was the American Flag. Given Jasper Johns' wholesale appropriation of the flag as a signature subject of his work, this could seem a perilous enterprise. Manzano, however, takes a much different approach than Johns; rather than treating the flag as an "object," he employs it symbolically (even paying tribute to the older artist in one painting by collaging pennies from 1955 and 1958 onto the stars to commemorate the years that Johns created his flag paintings).

As a naturalized U.S. citizen, born in Colombia, Manzano invests Old Glory with a unique emotional resonance in the process of probing its historical and political significance. In a painting called "Metamorphosis," for example, he replaces the stars of the flag with an image of a high-top sneaker with a single star on its side—a down-to-earth new symbol of

democracy in place of the lofty old ones; in another, "USA Today," a map of the country with the portrait of George Washington that appears on the dollar bill is superimposed over three overlapping flags to make a wry comment on materialism; in "Gray Flag," a zinc penny from 1943 is affixed to every star to commemorate the austere period during World War II, when copper and a lot of other things were scarce due to the war effort.

Aside from its historical content, each flag painting offers Manzano the opportunity to innovate within a predetermined framework, and he meets this challenge admirably, creating compelling variations of a set theme.

The show also featured several paintings in which the Statue of Liberty is employed symbolically: with a red ribbon draped around its neck and a tear running down its cheek as an AIDS memorial; painted in radiant rainbow hues to symbolize ethnic unity; wearing an oxygen mask to lament our pollution of the environment, and silhouetted dramatically against a night sky enlivened by fireworks in the canvas called "Celebration." While descriptions of these works make them sound rather simplistic, they are redeemed and become powerful statements by virtue of the artist's strong, emblematic compositions and dynamic color choices.

At once unabashedly patriotic and unsparing of our more glaring national foible, Raúl Manzano's "Evolving Symbols of America 2000" was a landmark in the career of this frequently exhibited New York artist.

*New York Notebook*