



STREET ART IN ARUBA: THE SAN NICOLAS MURALS

BY TONY GENGARELLY

▲ Mural of Prikichi by Garrick Marchena.

Aruba, a small island nestled near the northern coast of Argentina in the southern Caribbean, has a diverse population of 116,000 people from many different backgrounds, mostly European and Latin American. Part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the “happy island” is host to thousands of tourists who enjoy year-round sunshine, beautiful beaches and outdoor playgrounds. Buried under chic resorts, malls, casinos and high-rise hotels, much of the local art expression has been confined to entertainment.



▲ Aruba Art Fair organiser Tito Bolivar and his mother and co-organiser Diana Croes

However, over the past five years, Aruba has experienced an art revival that is beginning to nourish the creative roots of its people. The epicenter of this development is the southeastern city of San Nicolas, a once prosperous industrial center that fell on hard times beginning in 1985 with the closing of a major oil refinery. Another closing in 2009 left the city without an income base and with deserted streets and dilapidated buildings.

In 2015 a local art entrepreneur, Tito Bolivar, visited neighboring Colombia where he encountered some mind-bending art

on the streets of Bogota. Bolivar asked himself: “Why not here, on Aruba?” The following year Bolivar established the art gallery ArtisA (“Art is Aruba”) in San Nicolas and, with the help of his mother Diana Croes, organized the first Aruban Art Fair in the city, featuring 100 international and local artists.

The keystone of that art fair in San Nicolas involved an ambitious plan to economically revitalize the former industrial center with street art. With the support of the Ministries of Culture and Tourism and the island’s banking community, Bolivar commissioned street murals from a number of renowned international artists, whose amazing work infused a visual boost into the city’s depressed landscape. He commandeered vacant buildings to house temporary galleries for local, international,

beginning and established artists who displayed a variety of art work and crafts at the fair.

What began as an effort to lift the appearance of a destitute urban space inspired an art revival that has now spread well beyond San Nicolas to fuel an emerging local culture, both to the north and south.

The Portuguese muralist Bordalo II exemplifies much of the tone and commitment that has attended the San Nicolas art revival. An avid naturalist, Bordalo II began as a daring graffiti artist in his youth and has combined the skills he learned then with an environmental, preservationist theme. His assemblages of “Big Trash Animals” have become famous worldwide. In a recent interview he said: “Big Trash Animals is a series of artworks that aims to draw attention to a current problem that . . . involves

In a recent article describing the art renaissance in San Nicolas, one visitor noted: “As you walk around, the streets are silent, but the walls are loud, filled with bright colored murals.” Many extraordinary examples of street art created by contemporary mural masters, such as Guache, Isadora Paz Lopez, WD, Garrick Marchena, and Bond TruLuv, can be seen today.

Among the many new ventures is the gift shop Cosecha (meaning “harvest”), and its shelves are stocked with a harvest of local art and crafts from all over the island. Several of the high-quality craft items (e.g., necklaces, earrings) are fashioned from recycled materials, such as bottle caps and discarded jewelry. The San Nicolas shop has a companion Cosecha in the northern city of Oranjestad. The two outlets, supported by the Aruba C.R.A.F.T. Foundation, have helped promote and distribute the creative

artistry of the island to a broader and increasingly appreciative audience.

The Cosecha doorway is framed with the head and beak of a red Flamingo whose painted body wraps around the front and side of the store. Across the street the walls boast colorfully

adorned, larger-than-life carnival figures created by the Colombian artist Guache (“warrior” in the native *Muisca*) and by Isadora Paz Lopez from Chile.

The stunning figure of a carnival dancer by Isadora Paz Lopez flanks Guache’s monumental representations with brilliant contrasting colors achieved by her extraordinary mosaic technique acclaimed worldwide. Lopez, a ceramic artist and educator, developed her mosaic skills as the Artist Director of several urban beautification and edification projects in her native Chile. Working with teams of artists and craftsmen she accomplished miles of mosaic patterned walls featuring beautiful landscapes for the metro stations of Puento Alto, a contiguous suburb of Santiago.

In San Nicolas, Lopez’s team shows off their skillful applications of tesserae to celebrate a local carnival event with the metamorphosis of a lovely woman

into a magnificent butterfly. Here, the metaphorical connection to the natural world coincides with Lopez’s murals in Puento Alto that depict the living landscape overflowing with native flora and fauna.

EACH YEAR THE MURALS MULTIPLY AND LEAVE THEIR LASTING MARK ON WHAT HAS BECOME THE ART CAPITAL OF ARUBA. VIBRANT STREET ART, MUSEUMS, ART EMPORIUMS, HEALTH FOOD RESTAURANTS — MANY WITH AN ECOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY THAT EMBRACES THE PRESERVATION OF LAND AND LOCAL CULTURE — STAND IN MARKED CONTRAST TO THE MONUMENTAL TOURISM AND GLITTER THAT CROWDS THE COASTAL BEACHES.

In a covered courtyard, a New Age café featuring Aruban specialties employs benches decorated with beautifully articulated mosaics that punctuate the sidewalks and traffic islands throughout the city. Created by various organizations (schools and culturally conscious groups on the island), the benches picture birds, flowers, insects and animals from the indigenous landscape.

Nearby are formerly abandoned buildings that now display a number of exceptional murals that embrace the architecture—incorporating into their design the open doors and protruding window frames, pipes and drain spouts and even an occasional air conditioning unit hanging on the wall.

One of the most ingenious and startling achievements is a multi-story depiction of a turquoise iguana by the muralist known as WD (“Wild Drawing”). The mural covers two sides of a building while incorporating window frames and other architectural features for the giant reptile to sit and lean on. Born and raised on Bali, Indonesia, WD has painted murals in Asia, Europe and America. Now based in Athens, Greece, WD has aided the restoration of an ordinary building on a San Nicolas side street by giving it depth and dimension as well as providing yet another celebration for a native species.

On the corner opposite WD’s iguana, Garrick Marchena, from the neighboring island of Curacao, has also worked an image into a building’s façade. His rendition of a Prikichi—the Aruba



▲ A Big Trash Animal by Bordalo II.

waste production, materials that are not reused, pollution and its effect on the planet. The idea is to depict nature itself, in this case animals, out of materials that are responsible for its destruction.”

For the 2016 Art Fair, Bordalo II sculpted a mural of the Aruban iguana (“yuwana”) from scrap metal and recycled objects gathered from all over the island “to stress the critical conditions of a local species. . . still hunted today.”

Each year the murals multiply and leave their lasting mark on what has become the art capital of Aruba. Vibrant street art, museums, art emporiums, health food restaurants – many with an ecological trajectory that embraces the preservation of land and local culture—stand in marked contrast to the monumental tourism and glitter that crowds the coastal beaches.



National Bird – hugs the wall while negotiating several intruding pipes and vents. The Prikichi is shown perched on a painted tree as though it has just landed there. Known for his trompe l’oeil (fool the eye) depictions, Marchena incorporates an open veranda balcony into the mural thus reinforcing his illusion. The artist completes the work with an admonition by photographer Damilice Mansur inscribed with elaborate script to the left of the mural: “He who plants a tree plants life, plants faith, plants shelter, plants peace, plants hope for future generations.”

Finally, we note a mural by Bond TruLuv who captures a dolphin at the apex of its leap from the waters that surround the island. Here is a representation of the wilderness side of Aruba, where the ocean’s surf meets a desert landscape. It is also where Arikok National Park greets the visitor eager to explore its aboriginal cave drawings – the country’s first murals. With his aesthetic

▲ A turquoise iguana by the muralist known as WD (“Wild Drawing”).

▼ Bond TruLuv from Germany captures a Dolphin leaping through the waves.



sophistication and extraordinary skill, the German artist has captured a perfect moment in nature that represents an expanding mural project and the concurrent emergence of indigenous subject matter in the arts.

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Along with the murals and other street art in San Nicolas, Tito Bolivar's larger vision for Aruban art and culture is still unfolding. Historian Lindsay Bates (in his Master's thesis: "Bombing, Tagging, Writing: An Analysis of the Significance of Graffiti and Street Art," 2014) identifies such evolution as "creative place-making"—"an initiative that utilizes art-based activities as a means of urban revitalization," which uncovers the "heritage of place" and inspires "the collaboration of diversified people working toward a creative end goal." ❏

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▲ Street Art in San Nicholas, Aruba, by Guache from Colombia



◀ Aruban Welcome in San Nicolas



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◀ Street Art in San Nicholas, Aruba