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Meet Charles Juhasz-Alvarado's Giant Termite

The Puerto Rican sculptor gets buggy at Exit Art
by Robert Shuster
May 27th, 2008 12:00 AM

The termite might be an unlikely symbol of the commonwealth relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S., but for Charles Juhasz-Alvarado—a sculptor who lives in San Juan—the insect has become a kind of idol. At Exit Art, where the artist has his first solo show in New York, the wood-munchers are numerous: Several of them, four feet tall and with spiky mandibles, greet you at the door. An even larger winged version hangs from the ceiling, and, nearby, the bugs' dome-like nest becomes an afro for the goddess Daphne. "I started working with the termites because I realized they were my absolute enemy," says Alvarado, whose favorite material is cedar. But research led him to learn that the bug, prevalent in the Caribbean, requires symbiosis with a micro-organism in order to survive. "They need this thing," he explains, "to come into their bellies and live there, and live there forever"—an analogy (even if a little obscure) that he saw as representing Puerto Rico's dependence on the U.S.



He does mammals, too: Alvarado with equine pal.

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became a flying machine, modeled after da Vinci's design, and includes a music box that plays a sound similar to what the bugs make. The sculpture of the full-figured Caribbean Daphne includes the Fibonacci sequence, the Golden Mean, *Apollo* astronauts, termites, and touristy photo op. The show isn't called "Complicated Stories" for nothing.

Alvarado's oversized masses of material and ideas originate most importantly, he says, from an impulse to compensate for the marginalization of his country into narrow stereotypes. "The idea people have of Puerto Rico is very reduced," he says. "It's a ghetto, it's a fantasy island—something so small—and not a place for great writers, scientists."

Though politics and identity dominate his work, Alvarado steers clear of dogma, often delivering his messages with deadpan humor—exemplified in the shoe-shine sculpture and accompanying performance, perhaps his signature work. It's based on an experience that the artist, 42, had as a child during a brief time his family lived in the Dominican Republic, a country Alvarado remembers as being "very raw . . . the real Caribbean." One day, a good friend—a Dominican boy the same age—asked if he could shine Alvarado's shoes. "Suddenly," Alvarado says, "I was open to a different reality: the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated"—the inequalities, he's quick to point out, of colonialism. Playing off the memory, Alvarado performs as a shoe-shiner himself, a character who achieves, with his specially designed box (duplicated in the large version), a kind of equality: The customer's shoe activates a pedal that, in turn, moves a feathery ball up and down to brush the shoe-shiner's crotch. "I'm not just a servant," says this cheeky artist, proudly Puerto Rican. "I'm being served as well."

Howard Huang

Counter Culture: A Great, Cheap Wine List Is Only One of Fiore's Many Charms (2)
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