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Guiding Hands Help Immigrant Artists Connect



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Hatuey Ramos-Fermin, 30, right, and his mentor, Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga, 37, visit the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

By **TINA KELLEY**
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Something about the man in the banana costume appealed to Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga. Maybe it was the sign he wore that read, "A banana from my country can travel easier than me." Maybe it was the fruit-wearer's free-spiritedness as he paraded in his peel through public places. Or maybe it was the Latino roots they shared.

So when Mr. Zúñiga, 37, a graphic artist from Brooklyn who also works with new media, was looking through the portfolios of immigrant artists who were seeking mentors, he picked Hatuey Ramos-Fermin, 30, a conceptual artist from the Bronx who has made videos of himself playing Benito Banana, a character he created to reflect on migration.

The two have met at least 10 times, attending lectures and museum openings and discussing their work and the common themes within, like [immigration](#) and globalization. They are part of a mentoring program run by the New York Foundation for the Arts that helps artists from abroad gain a foothold in the city's diverse arts community.

Mr. Zúñiga's parents are from Nicaragua, and Mr. Ramos-Fermin was born in the Dominican Republic, raised in Puerto Rico and educated in the Netherlands.

Mr. Ramos-Fermin says that being an immigrant inspires him. "I really enjoy being in a place I've never been to before," he said. "I see things differently than someone who has lived here all your life."

Michael L. Royce, the executive director of the arts foundation, said the mentoring program began in 2007. It is an offshoot of the foundation's New York Creates program that helps folk and craft artists, many of whom are immigrants and need to connect with established artists.

"The mentors know the galleries, what's hot, what's wanted, what can sell," he said. "They can help the mentees become fully immersed in what it takes to be successful."

The mentorship program, which this year has 15 pairs of mentors and mentees, costs about \$100,000 to run, and is supported with grants from the Deutsche Bank Americas

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Foundation and the Independence Community Foundation. Mr. Royce said his foundation was seeking financing to expand the program, which does not inquire about the immigration status of the artists seeking mentors.

To get Mr. Ramos-Fermin closer to his dream of putting on a solo show and supporting himself through art, Mr. Zúñiga helped him with creating his Web site, www.hatmax.net, which recently netted Mr. Ramos-Fermin work with an Argentine magazine. Mr. Zúñiga also advised him on editing his artist's statement.

"This idea of transmuting home, it needs developing further, in a separate paragraph," Mr. Zúñiga told Mr. Ramos-Fermin as they sat in the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#) last Wednesday working on the statement. He suggested adding spaces between the paragraphs, finding a better word for "utilizes" and switching an "of" with an "in."

"That sounds better, that definitely sounds better," Mr. Ramos-Fermin said.

The relationship has helped Mr. Zúñiga as well. He included Mr. Ramos-Fermin in his Web project, at www.votemos.us, which asks immigrants whom they would vote for in this year's presidential election.

"We bounce around ideas," Mr. Zúñiga said. "Anyone who has done a Master of Fine Arts will tell you what they miss most is the community and the studio visits."

Mr. Zúñiga, who won a fellowship from the foundation for his work, chose the mentoring program as part of the community service requirement. "I was actively missing teaching," he said.

Likewise, Ted Mathys, 29, a Brooklyn poet and fellowship winner who had a valuable relationship with a mentor while in college, said he was glad to become a mentor to Pinky Vincent, 30, a poet from Calcutta.

Ms. Vincent, who had worked as a journalist in India, came to the United States in 2002 with "\$2,500 in traveler's checks and the blessings of my parents." While studying, working at a nonprofit organization and trying to send money home, she found it hard to continue with her poetry.

"She came to me with a small group of poems and wanted more than anything, in the beginning, confirmation, a set of eyes, a person who reads a lot of poetry to tell her if she was wasting her time," Mr. Mathys said. "I put it all back in her court, to think of the role of poetry for her in her life."

Their time together since has been quite fruitful, he said. "Her work is crisp. She has very strong images, and some of the subject matter she was writing about was really quite wonderful," said Mr. Mathys, the author of two books of poetry. They fine-tuned Ms. Vincent's poems, discussing where they might sound anachronistic to an American ear, and explored how to carve out time to write poetry while trying to make a living.

"To do writing, to be honest with you, seemed to me as a very, very selfish thing to do," Ms. Vincent said. "I have to work. I have a lot of big dreams to follow in this country."

The mentorship program helped her feel connected to other artists.

"I had the luxury of having that artist's soul sort of come back, nurturing that a little bit more," Ms. Vincent said. She and Mr. Mathys discussed giving readings, and she gained the confidence to do a reading in Manhattan that was sponsored by the South Asian Women's Creative Collective. She read her own vivid lines, like these from "Calcutta":

Inside the bus, body on body

Starched saris drenched in sweat

Talcum powder becomes dew drops on temples

Smudges necks like plaster of Paris

For poets, whose market is small and not particularly profitable, the help of a mentor can

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be crucial, Mr. Mathys said.

“If you’re not being trained in a formalized setting, if you’re not into an M.F.A. in poetry, or involved in workshops, you really can feel unmoored and alone in this kind of pursuit.”

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