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*Colombia Under Stress, Revolutionary Humor: Art and Politics in Panama.*





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*Seis de Mayo, 1984. No. 1., by Panamanian artist Rogelio Pretto (tempera, 13 x 23 inches).*

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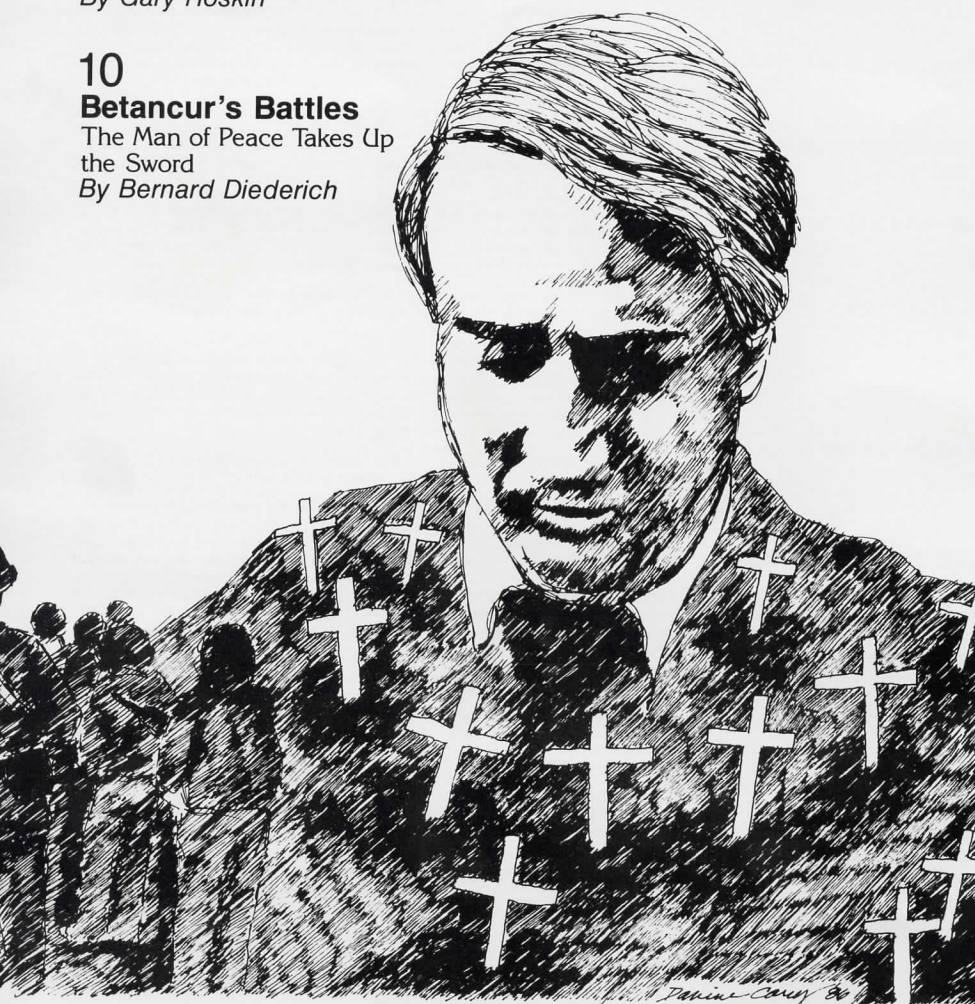
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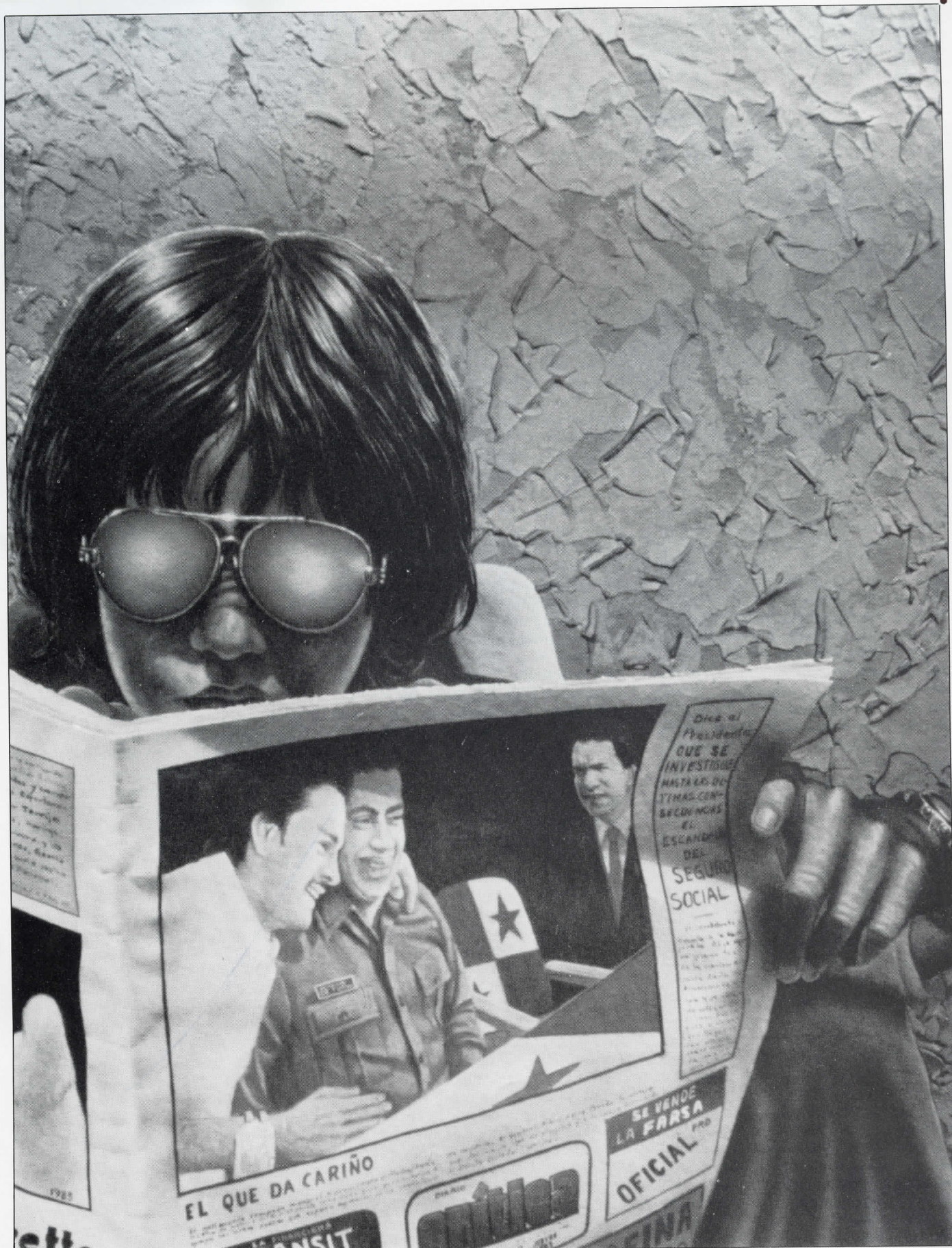
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El Que Da Cariño. 1983. Tempera, 9" x 11" by Rogelio Pretto.



# Searching for Pretto

## Politics and Art in Panama

By Sandra Serrano

*Rogelio Pretto is one of Panama's most controversial contemporary painters. With an uncanny gift for prophecy, he has managed to predict recent Panamanian political history in his canvases. With technical skill and aesthetic sobriety, Pretto has avoided the iconoclasm of militant art. Yet he has touched deep sensitivities in his compatriots, articulating a heretofore silent national conscience. Pretto's 1984 exhibit at Panama's Museum of Contemporary Art, titled **National Peace: A Pictorial Essay**, drew a public and media response unparalleled in Panamanian history.*

*Sandra Serrano first became interested in Pretto when she was a graduate student in fine arts in California. She spent five months in Panama in 1984 to do research and to interview Pretto. The following excerpt is from her book in progress on Pretto. Here, she narrates her journey to Pretto's retreat in the mountains of Panama on the Costa Rican border where she hopes to find the artist for an interview. She reflects on her search for the artist and for the underlying relationships between politics, values and art.*

### Hike into Paradise

**M**y stomach fidgeted with the queer mixture of fear and excitement, apprehension and fascination one gets when something intense is about to be experienced—much like what grips performers minutes before curtain on opening night. Despite cold and wind, I was perspiring; my pores were open wide, my senses keen to themselves.

I had passed the gate with the lock and went over a drooping wooden bridge about 12 feet long that crossed the river, now narrowed down to a fraction of what it was even in Guadalupe. A short distance ahead I came to a cabin on the left. A large pond stood in front of it. Flowers were blooming everywhere around the house and down to the water line. A pair of swans glided smooth

on the surface not far from a group of ducks and ducklings pecking the ground. On the far side, a small fall cascaded down several steps into the pool. The scene was a fairy tale illustration, live. It stood in such sharp contrast with what I had seen in Guadalupe, I was curious to know who the place belonged to. Seeing chimney smoke I decided to move in closer to catch sight of someone inside, but was stood off by a dog that dashed from behind the house, hairs on end, barking down the stone steps leading from the house to the pond. He broke the charge at the bottom of the steps and stood yelping. I honored the distance he seemed to want to keep between us and opted to take a couple of pictures instead and went on. I hadn't the time for curious inquiries.

From there on, the hike began to exact constant physical exertion. At every step, new strength was required because of the sharpening angle of climb. My leg muscles burned and gave initial signs of fatigue. The rough path obliged a lumbering pace and a stop every few minutes to catch my breath. Only five feet wide, parallel tracks on the path witnessed its occasional use as a rudimentary road filled in partially with stone sunk practically out of sight over time. Constant erosion and use had worn it down and had exposed big boulders, some jagged and threatening. Deep grooves had been carved by tires in a good number of places. Even a jeep would have a jolting ride trying to master them, and *only* a jeep could.

The road meandered through small patches of brush until it reached another bridge about 15 feet long. It was dangerously veneered with wet moss, and it leaned rather precariously to the left. A mass of boulders directly below in the middle of the river warned of pain should I fall. The bridge had no railings. It was made of two large logs strewn parallel across and a few feet apart connecting each side. Two by twelves—nailed rather doubtfully to the logs, a few severely warped—served as the platform. The light rain made the wood shine menacingly. I took every step carefully. A few boards felt loose. I was trembling and looking down at my feet. Occasionally I would stop to look up. My mind was trapped

between the desire to glance at the beauty surrounding me and the thoughts of falling. I've dreaded falls and heights all my life. I was tempted to crawl across.

Safe on the other side at last, I paused to observe the river and absorb the peace of the forest cradled around it. The boulders below were covered with moss; water sliding smoothly by them and turning bubbles as it fell and swirled. Through the different sounds the river murmured, I could hear the silence and listened. "I'm alone" I thought. I was breathing strong and even, my palms moist and blushed. My face must have been too; it tingled and felt warm. Heat flushed through my body like a rush of sexual excitement. It was a moment, exotic and magical.

I don't remember how long I remained there, perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. The feeling of the sun burning my back bunted me out of the spell. It had stopped raining.

According to my map I was a third of the way. I passed a wooden gate with a wire loop as a latch. Maria had emphasized to be sure to leave it shut. "There is a group of wild horses up there that shouldn't escape through the gate because they damage gardens and crop," she said. "Some neighbors have threatened to shoot them if the owner doesn't keep them from coming down."

"Who's the owner?"

"Señor Paul. He used to live up there and had a farm, but he hardly comes anymore."

"Where is he now?"

"He lives in Panama City now."

I crossed a meadow, half of which was occupied by a fenced yard and house. An Indian woman hung clothes for drying. "Hola," I said, "could you tell me if I'm heading in the right direction to the house of Mr. Pretto?" She looked at me in silence and nodded 'no' but I could tell it wasn't in response to my question. I was about to rephrase it when a man, an Indian too, came out of the tiny wooden house. "Follow this road and cross the river," he said after a brief greeting. "The road will take you straight there." I thanked him and moved on. I was glad to see that, although far apart, at least people lived on the way. It relaxed some of my apprehensions of being alone.





**Flechista Nacionalista.** 1983. Tempera, 13" x 18" by Rogelio Pretto.

The river had no bridge. The path ran right into it and steeped up on the other side. A gate guarded the river on my side. It was even more primitively engineered than the one before. It was made of small thin tree stems joined by barbed wire nailed in three evenly spaced points, forming a few feet of fence. One end was fixed on one side and the other kept loose, pulled in place when closing. The loose end stem is slipped into wire loops fixed on the bottom and top of a supporting stalk on the other side. It took me a while to pry the gate open. The gate slipped from my grasp and snapped back across the path like a rubber band nearly slashing my face. It was just as troublesome to close.

The mud made matters worse. The abundant precipitation of the region keeps the soil wet and soft. Horses and wheels had churned the path to a paste. I was getting stuck in it constantly, forcing me to step from rock to rock to keep atop ground. It required balancing expertise which I dreadfully lacked, so inevitably I would fall off into a gape of mush every two or three stones. Once I had to pry myself loose by pulling on a tree branch. My shoes and jeans were caked in mud up to my knee. I realized why rubber boots were so prevalent in the area.

I washed off some of the mud in the river. It was the first time I had come in direct contact with it. It was fairly level at that spot. The water was cold and clear. I was tempted to drink, but I refrained for precaution. I had to walk through it to make the other side. It wasn't deep, but it was full of rocks of all sizes up to a foot and a half in diameter. Once across, the road got rougher and steeper and narrower. Walking was difficult, even more than before until the path levelled a bit into an open meadow studded with trees spaced randomly apart. It took me a while to cover the length of it. As the path veered into dense forest, it began to rain again, this time heavily enough to force me under a tree.

I couldn't get over the splendor of the terrain around me. More and more it was taking on the true complexion of a rain forest. To my back I could hear the river. On each side of it trees grouped close together overshadowed the water creating a chamber for the water's song trapped inside. Twisting white and green moss covered the tree trunks and limbs from which parasite plants dangled and bred orchids. Fog prowled mysteriously through the treetops. On the ground, fungus and moss feasted on the moist dead bark of fallen trees. Ferns

were everywhere, growing in the same abundance of grass. I had the sense that time had slowed to a stop. I looked down on some dark red berries growing on a bush to my right. "The *zarzamoras*," I thought. They looked like raspberries all right, maroon, almost black.

As I squatted to pick one, a flutter a few inches from my hand startled me. It was a bird feeding on the bottom of the bush. I must have frightened it when I reached for the berries. He sprang up about a foot and stood poised for flight on an outward branch, its neck twisted so his eye could keep me under observation. I froze, wanting not to frighten it, to savor the opportunity of watching it so close, but I betrayed my good intentions. I guess the fact that I ceased to move was taken precisely as a threat, like the freeze posture cats adopt when stalking their prey. So, it flew to a branch above me where its assessment of my intentions could be more safely determined. Seeing it gobble up a berry before, encouraged me to pick one for myself. I picked a deep colored one and nibbled cautiously, looking frequently for bugs or worms.

When the rain let up, I was chilled by a breeze that swept across the path. I was soaked and I hadn't really noticed how





**El Ultimo del 80.** 1981 Tempera, 6" x 8" by Rogelio Pretto.

much. Renewing the hike was a disheartening thought. I was feeling fatigued and hungry and cold. I had to stop more frequently to catch my breath. The altitude was affecting me. Without much food in my system, I felt faint and dizzy and decided to sit on a boulder to regain my balance. An overwhelming sense of fear crept over me. I began to think about where I was. The thought of being in the jungle alone made me shiver even more than I already was. I could see no one, hear no one. There wasn't a house in sight and the forest had become so dense around me that the rocky path was the only clearing. I had no idea what was ahead and my growing paranoia gave way to visions of wild animals lurking in the bushes. "My God, what are you doing here Sandra?" I questioned myself punishingly. I couldn't understand my sudden feelings of compunction. I was about to cry. I felt vulnerable sitting there, feeling so insecure, so remorseful. I decided to shake myself from those feelings and got up to fight the negative inertia that had set in on me. As I was getting up I heard a noise. I listened carefully. They were thumps, even and forceful, like strong steps. Goose bumps sprang up all over my body. I could feel them crawl down my neck and shoulders. I was frozen,

almost in panic.

Suddenly a dog popped into view from out of the bend in the road. Apparently he too was alarmed, because he froze with a jolt when he saw me and began barking frantically, the bristles on his neck spiked straight up. Moments later, a man appeared clumping down the path wearing rubber boots. He was bearded and wore a thick corduroy jacket and a funny cone-shaped hat. His jeans were snuggled into the boots. He was white, tall, his appearance rugged, a machete in his hand.

When he saw me half-terrified-to-death, he yelled at the dog and followed with a firm loud whistle—"Runcho! Fieuuu!" The dog immediately stopped barking and crouched submissively to the man's side, slurring his "grrrrr" as he kept his eyes on me. Runcho had blotches of black and white fur all the way down to his legs. A large patch of white on his chest. His look was timid behind his long snout and framed by ears half bent down.

The man walked towards me smiling, his eyes fixed strong and firmly to mine. They were dark brown. His smile was pleasant and reassuring under the beard. I tried to appear calm as he approached me. "Good afternoon," he said. "Good afternoon," I

replied.

"What are you doing here alone and wet? Are there more coming behind?"

"Uh, no. I'm alone. I was on my way to Mr. Pretto's house. Am I on the right path?"

"Yes, but Mr. Pretto isn't there now."

"Oh. Uh. Do you, uh, know when he will be back. He is here, isn't he? I mean, he is here and not in Panama City or somewhere else, is he?" I held my breath. My God, I didn't want to hear that he was away. I couldn't bear the thought that I had gone through this whole ordeal to miss him.

"No. He's here, but he's not in his house right now." He was smiling and not once took his eyes away from mine. I felt as if he were looking right through into my insides. I watched desperately for signs that everything was OK, that he wasn't out to harm me or anything. I had felt so afraid and miserable a few moments before.

"Would you know when he will be back? Maybe I could wait for him in his house, if he won't be too long. Could you tell me how far is it from here? I need to see him very much."

"Yes, I can tell you do. You're drenched. You look exhausted, afraid and you're alone. It must be important." He paused and then said, "It's only a few minutes further. I'll tell





**Trapeador de Rojo Color** 1983. Tempera, 18" x 23" by Rogelio Pretto.

you what. Come up with me to the house and dry up. I'll fix you something warm to drink. The climate here can be treacherous if you're not careful." He picked my bag and began walking, Runcho running ahead of him. In a second he had covered a few meters effortlessly. He knew how to handle the terrain. I scrambled to catch up. I had no idea who he was, but I figured he was familiar enough with Pretto since he knew where he had gone and had offered so readily to take me to his house, let alone use his kitchen. I tried to talk to him as I scuttled to keep up, the words barely making it out of my lips. I was panting, gulping for oxygen.

"Ah, uh Have you known him long?" I asked as I stumbled behind him.

"Yes. All my life and all his life as a matter of fact," he said without turning his head.

"That's interesting," I said sucking in air desperately. He could be a source of history and information about Pretto for me if he knew him so well, I told myself. I fumbled for more conversation. "Where uh, ummm

ah where, uh did "

I gasped. He turned and approached me and said, "Look, let me give you some tips on how to walk over this ground."

I surrendered to his suggestion willingly. I needed some help, any kind. I stopped and felt my eyes fogging. I was about to faint. He noticed and helped me sit down on one of the boulders on the side of the path. "Oh, God, yes, please do. Teach me how to do it. My heart's about to burst." I said abandoning myself to his arms.

"Rest for a few minutes. You look very pale. Let your heart beat settle down again. Don't jerk your breaths, just take each one long and gently. Let it out quickly, but easy. Don't pant. That's it." He squatted, facing me. He looked at me intently now, watching over my breathing. He looked all around me, at all of me. Runcho moved closer, wagging his tail and smelling me. "You're obviously not from Panama, where are you from?"

"Why? Does being grossly inept on this

mountain hike, give my alien origins away?" I asked him jokingly. He smiled.

"No. Your accent and looks, obviously." He dug the machete into the ground and drew out a knife from a sheath on his belt. From his jacket pocket he pulled out a small brown lump of something wrapped in plastic. He carved a piece from it and gave it to me. "Here, eat this. It'll stabilize your energies a bit. It'll give you some vigor for the rest of the way."

"What is it?" I hesitated and did not reach for it.

"Here. At least take it in your hands and look it over while I tell you what it is. It won't kill you for one thing." I gave him a reserved smile. He took a piece himself and put it in his mouth and chewed, crushing it with ease. "It's *panela*. It's made of raw sugar. It's the purest cane sugar there is second to chewing on the cane. Other than a few dead bugs you might find in it once in a while, it's safe and all natural. It's a great quick energy source."

I nibbled at it as I had done with the berry. It was sweet, and, yes, its taste raw and strong, mildly sour. It was deep brown. I took a larger bite and held it on my tongue. It was delicious. As it melted I craved for more. "This is great!" I said. "I've had brown sugar before, but this is really rich and delicious. Thank you." I took another bite and this time crushed it and swallowed.

"So, where are you from?" he asked. He put away his knife and flung a piece of *panela* at Runcho. The dog snatched it in mid air.

"San Francisco, California." I've lived there most of my life.

"And what is a young woman from San Francisco like you doing here, looking for Rogelio Pretto?"

"I'm working on a book and he's the subject of it. I was hoping to meet and talk with him to see if he could help me with first-hand information about his work and himself. Perhaps you can help me too, since you've known him for a long time."

"Well, anything I would tell you he'd tell you the same, believe me." He leaned back against a tree stump and when he did his hat tipped accidentally down over his face. He pushed it back making a comical gesture that made me giggle. I wondered how old he was. His beard had strands of grey hair and had wrinkles around his eyes. He looked strong.

He picked some berries from a bush nearby offered me some. I declined. "Go ahead, eat a few, they'll mix well with the *panela* and keep you from getting dizzy."

"Funny," I said. "Just before your dog appeared I got really dizzy after eating one."

"Oh, that wasn't the berry," he said. "It's the altitude and the way you were walking. It had nothing to do with the berries. Go ahead, eat a few. It'll do you good." He

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## Pretto

Continued from page 32

leaned back on the log again, and this time seemed to be settling in for a long rap, as if he had forgotten that he was to escort me to Pretto's house to dry up. I wasn't feeling cold anymore, though. The discomfort had left me completely. A warming dash of sunlight was spotlighting us. In fact, I felt rather well. I decided to let him continue directing my energies as he obviously had been doing rather effectively already.

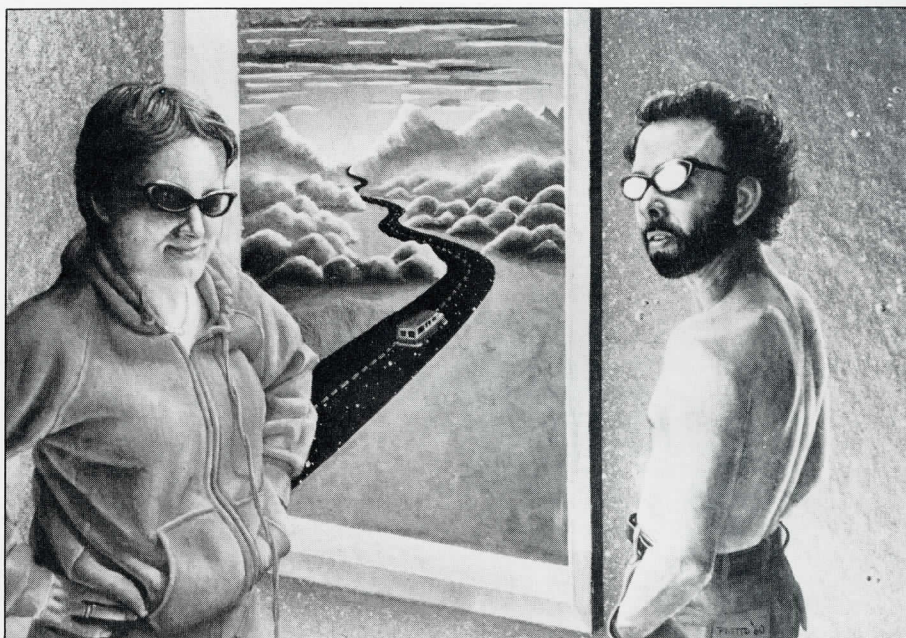
"Why is he the purpose of your book?" he asked.

"Oh, geez, that's such a long story." I wasn't about to go into detail about the book. At that moment it was the last thing I wanted to do. Besides, I had been riddled with doubt the night before, thinking that perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea after all to have taken this trip and made the expense. Although the adventure and challenge was interesting to contemplate and all that, the complications the whole thing might involve were seriously discouraging my optimism and desire.

"Be brief," he said.

"Well, I'm an art major in a California university and wanted to write on Latin American political artists, or artists that do political themes in their work. I was bored with the whole thing, because I had been finding nothing really new or different to say about politics in art. Everything seemed to have been said about the subject already. I wanted to contribute something different, and didn't know how or what. One day I found out about a Panamanian artist that had become very controversial for doing political painting in a different, well, very serious way. It wasn't the usual radical protest, denouncing style of painting that is normally seen in political art. I did some minor research on him to see if he was interesting enough to include him among the Latin American artists I was going to cover and I liked what I found, so I did some more research on him. I discovered even more interesting qualities about him that seemed perfect for my paper. One day I stopped myself. I became self-conscious, because I felt I was revving into a long monopolizing tale about myself. It was a habit I wanted to break as I could easily bore anyone to death that wasn't interested. I was sure this man was not banking on listening to a long story about my personal scholastic ordeals. He seemed intent enough, however, leaning against the log, his head nestled back against his hands; but I felt I would soon bore him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I think I'm about to get carried away with the story, and I just real-



**Viaje a Fantasía.** 1981 Tempera, 5" x 7" by Rogelio Pretto.

ized I've told it many times before and each time is hard for me to stop blabbering about it."

"Please, please go on. I'm interested, really. Don't mind me. I'll stop you when I can't take anymore."

"Oh well. If you really want me to. Let's see, where was I um "

"Oh, yes! Well, one day it dawned on me that perhaps my best bet at broaching a whole new perspective would be not to focus on politics in art in general but rather to do the reverse. Why not investigate the nature of how political interests arise within an artist to the point where he feels compelled to express them pictorially by viewing it through his personal viewpoint? But, I figured, to be able to do that, to be able to dig into those motivations, I should concentrate on just one artist. If I could find an artist that exemplified the motivational qualities I wanted to investigate, that would be enough to concentrate on. It was better if the artist were unknown internationally because the spectrum of his political concerns could be better studied within a more restricted range of social environment. Pretto fits the bill, perfectly."

"Why did you choose him in particular?"

"To tell you the truth I didn't have many artists to pick from. The information is simply not available for me to know who they are. Learning about Mr. Pretto was like a prize find, and the more I found out about him the more interesting it became to use him. His approach to political commentary through his art was unique, and the things he had said about his beliefs and his ideas were perfect. He seemed clear and very sober about what he was doing. That could be a plus in analyzing his purposes and motivations, because he could do his own re-

flecting and explaining. I've read some articles and interviews that have been written on him and I would like to meet him and talk with him to see if he can grant me an interview. I decided to come to Panama and try to see him personally for an interview. Do you think he'll give me one?" I turned to him as if I hoping he would set up the opportunity for me.

"That could be arranged." He smiled again, somewhat mischievously, I felt. "Who told you he was here?"

"I spoke with his wife. She encouraged me to come to see him here."

"Obviously you don't know what he looks like," he said.

"Well, I've seen some pictures of him in articles. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you say I obviously didn't know what he looked like?" I couldn't tell what difference that made.

"I'm afraid I've played with you a bit, Sandra. Please don't be offended with what I am about to say. Have you noticed that neither of us have introduced ourselves formally to each other?"

He was right. When meeting people for the first time, I automatically introduce myself, but had completely overlooked the formality. The circumstances and the unusual place had something to do with it, I thought. I was anxious to hear him out. He knew something I didn't and he was about to let me know.

"You are ?" he said coming towards me with arm extended for a handshake. His grip was firm but gentle; his hand was warm. Slightly perplexed, I looked into his eyes and said, "Sandra, Sandra Serrano."

"I am very pleased to meet you Sandra. And I mean that. I'm Rogelio Pretto." □



# An Exhibition for National Peace

Early in 1983, Rogelio Pretto became irate at the counterfeit promises of national redemption and peace being trumpeted by the then military strongman ruling Panama, General Rubén Darío Paredes. The general was making an early bid to the presidential elections to be held the following year. For weeks, Pretto had focused his attention on the media, noting the frequency with which the words "National Peace" were being manipulated by the contestants. He grew watchful of the cynical theatrics and the self-serving campaign rhetoric. Pretto observed how the government-controlled media exploited speeches riddled with hype about social justice and peace. New questionably-enacted electoral laws were promoted as the "Insurance Policy for Peace" by officials who were publicly perceived as corrupt.

The artist produced a painting about his concerns titled "Custodians of 84," a work courageously critical of the military-controlled government and the electoral process. That work was the beginning of what would become the most significant exhibition in Panama's cultural history. Titled "National Peace: A Pictorial Essay," it would consist of 42 works in tempera dedicated to Panama's national conscience and shown in the country's Museum of Contemporary Art. Never had a Panamanian artist dedicated such a large collection to the theme of his country's political morality.

The exhibit's intellectual impact and the fact that it predicted grave political events were instrumental in altering the artist's image—he had been accused by the left of being "Gringo influenced" and by the right as inconsequential. Not only did he win official recognition, but the exhibit increased the base of both his popular and intellectual support. The public flocked to the museum, in record numbers, praising the artist's commitment to the truth about the country's political malaise. More importantly, the exhibit raised the issue of the need for Panama's artists to address social and political issues during troubled times. Art-loving Panamanians were finding their artists too commercial and indifferent to social concerns. This show finally responded to the need for a politically reactive art in Panama.

Two weeks into the show, President Ricardo de la Espriella was ousted by the military. The vacancy was filled by vice president Jorge Illueca. Pretto had used him as a subject in four of the six works dealing with the country's power hierarchy. Intriguingly, the deposed president was conspicuously absent from the entire 42-piece collection. Even General Noriega, the country's military strongman, had been portrayed in at least one of the paintings. Events ahead would confirm the prophetic perception of

the "coincidence."

The arrangement of images and symbols in the paintings would prove a more precise prognosis of things to come than the absence of any figure. In one work, the vice president is depicted in sunglasses sitting in what is obviously the president's chair, his posture erect and pompous. A dove donning a military cap is perched on his right shoulder. In an open book on the table in front of him an inscription refers to "official deceit and corruption;" to the extreme left of the painting, a tiny figure on the table points a video news camera at him. Dollar bills pour from the vice president's pockets under the table. In another picture, the same vice president is seen reading from a piece of paper that is taken to be an inaugural speech. Pretto had foretold the events that would place the vice president in the presidency. It was the most acknowledged "prophecy" attributed to the collection.

Others had been fulfilled months before, soon after he painted them. One in particular was trenchantly exact in forecasting the tragic climax of a political drama expected to end differently by most of the country.

After General Omar Torrijos's death in what was reported as a plane crash in 1981, power was transferred to Rubén Paredes who soon after was promoted to general. One of Jimmy Carter's fringe legacies of the Panama Canal treaty had been Torrijos's promise to return the country to democratic rule. With the charismatic Torrijos dead, Paredes's chances in the running were good, and he played his ambitions to become president to the hilt by publicly guaranteeing that elections would be held as promised in May 1984. He then considered his options by maneuvering and monopolizing control of the media. To insure complete coverage, he bullied stock holders of TV and radio stations that were reluctant to support him into selling him a controlling interest or by threatening to cancel government advertising in the networks. Daily propaganda poured out about the "virtues" of Paredes through the servile stations and newspapers. Impressed by the intense hype, several political groups clustered to his camp and formed a potent coalition that appeared hard to beat. When Paredes's chances of success seemed most secure, Pretto produced a painting anticipating a different fate for the general.

The artist showed him uniformed and wearing sunglasses, on the screen of a small, toyish, playfully colored TV set sitting on a tabletop image of the Panamanian flag. Paredes's face is turned toward an empty chair that has Panama's coat of arms elaborately carved on its back, over which rests the presidential sash. Behind the table, a

solitary gray haired *cholo* plays a fiddle as he looks sadly down into the set. The knobs are labeled with writing that identify the oppression co-sponsored by Paredes when he participated in the Torrijos coup years before. "1968" replaces the TV's brand name and the dial is set on channel 11. October 11, 1968 was the day the coup brought down constitutionally elected and three times deposed President Arnulfo Arias. The words "deceit" and "abuse" substitute "brightness" and "contrast" on other dials. On this TV set of Pretto's, the power button means something entirely different.

Pretto's insinuation was clear. He was telling Paredes that his efforts to become president were vacuous and he warned that success would be denied him by the illegitimate forces of Panama's corrupt domestic realities he himself was perpetuating. That he better become resigned to them was symbolized by the fiddle-playing mestizo paying his condolences to the time of collapsed, over-inflated dreams.

Pretto's forecast turned out to be fatally accurate. Paredes's ambitions were felled, ironically, by the principles of his own Machiavellian contrivance. The military backing that guaranteed his only true source of political power was stripped from him by his colleague, General Manuel Antonio Noriega. Immediately after taking over as military chief after Paredes's resignation, Noriega forbade him access to military headquarters, the public coffers and government institutions that were the only sustaining force of his campaign. With his crucial leverage removed, Paredes's potential for the high office was doomed. Soon after, the political factions that had pledged him their support withdrew it, sealing his political fate. Though he stubbornly campaigned on, he ended with paltry electoral pickings, beaten and forgotten. The lesson: the traditional realities of Panama's less-than-loyal power players are immutable, and Pretto had reminded his fellow nationals about that in a single but eloquent canvas a mere 10 by 13 inches.

"Well," said a museum guard, "because he predicted things that actually happened later, a lot more people and even ones that had already seen the show came back to see it again, bringing friends and their children. Several teachers from elementary schools brought their whole class. The show meant something. People are dissatisfied with the situation in the government. They liked the show because Pretto reflected what they felt. No painter had done that before." □

—SANDRA SERRANO

