

Borinquen. The Teaching Artist

Ilaria Costa (July 30, 2008)



Her name is Borinquen Gallo, she is an artist born in Rome 33 years ago from an Italian father and a Puerto Rican mother. Her personal history is incredible and at the same time touching: she came to New York in 1988 with her parents at the age of 13. Her parents followed the call of Pope John Paul the II to volunteer as a missionary family and so they left everything behind and we moved from Rome to the South Bronx on a mission of the Catholic Church...

We are stricken by her exotic looks, she resembles like the American actress Halle Berry but she surprises us when she answers our questions in a perfect Italian with a strong roman accent! Her name is Borinquen Gallo, she is an artist born in Rome 33 years ago from an Italian father and a Puerto Rican mother ('Borinquen' is infact the original name of Puerto Rico). Her personal history is incredible and at the same time touching: she came to New York in 1988 with her parents at the age



of 13. Her parents followed the call of Pope John Paul the II to volunteer as a missionary family and so they left everything behind and we moved from Rome to the South Bronx on a mission of the Catholic Church. The change was remarkable and while at the beginning she was rebellious and nostalgic of her comfortable life in Rome, this was truly a life-changing experience for her.

She had to quickly learn English and Spanish while she went to high school in the Bronx





At that point in her life she learned that Art was her true calling. After completing her masters' degree in art at Cooper Union, she began teaching through "Studio in a school" a non for profit organization that places artists in the public school system. A year later she was hired by the principal and began teaching art full time at PS/IS 268 in Queens, NY. This was a truly amazing experience as she discovered that the children can learn how to draw from observation at a very early age if they are taught that even the most complex subjects can be broken down into simple lines and shapes.

And now the works by some of her young students have been selected for two prestigious shows in the City: "The Art of Design: Selection from Studio's Design Education" at Studio in a School Gallery and for the Public School's annual show at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) [2] in New York!

For Borinquen this is an amazing accomplishment, because-as she put it-" It was wonderful to see their work framed professionally, their enthusiasm and the fact that they can experience that being an artist today is not a myth or a delusion but a real possibility within their reach".

Tell us your story...how did you arrive to NYC?

"I came to New York in 1988 with my parents at the age of 13. My parents followed the call of Pope John Paul the II to volunteer as a missionary family and so we left everything behind and we moved from Rome where I was born, to the South Bronx for a mission of the Catholic Church."

Has it been difficult for you to adjust to the 'hard life' in the Bronx?

"The change was remarkable and while at the beginning I was rebellious and nostalgic of my comfortable life in Rome, this was truly a life-changing experience for me. I quickly learned English and Spanish while I went to high school in the Bronx with metal detectors and had to adjust to a kind of derelict urban surrounding .

How did you become an artist?

" My art teacher in high school noticed me and encouraged me to apply to the Saturday Program for High school students at the Cooper Union, where I learned how to draw and put together a portfolio. A year later I applied and got in. I learned that art was truly what I wanted to do. Because of my cultural hybridity (I am half Italian and half Puerto-Rican) and my relocation to New York I was displaced, and I felt that art helped me recognize and explore deeper layers of identity . I became aware that through the creative process you can transform garbage into art, transcend the limitations of reality and transform the familiar or even the mediocre into the extraordinary. This gave me a sense of continuous challenge as I learned to constantly reconfigure familiar materials and situations into sculptures and as I began to discover all that New York as a cultural capital rich in artistic tradition. In an increasingly globalize society art gave me the tools to think critically about issues both personal and political and provided a vehicle for dialogue..."

How did you make the transition from a carrier as an artist to a career as a teacher?

"After completing my masters I worked in at the New York historical society department of prints photos and architectural drawings, and for a publishing company reading and cataloguing art and architectural journals, then I got a job for television working as a designer for a home makeover



show and finally I began teaching through studio in a school a non profit organization to that places artists in the public school system . A year later I was hired by the principal and began teaching full time art at PS/IS 268. This was a truly amazing experience as I discovered that the children can learn how to draw from observation at a very early age if they are taught that even the most complex subjects can be broken down into simple lines and shapes."

What are the aspects of your job that you like the most and which are the ones that you dislike the most?

"Well...I realized that when given the right tools the kids are able to produce incredibly expressive work, and they constantly surprise me as they deepen they conceptual and technical artistic capacities. They constantly surpass my expectations...and I think we have a reached a level after 4 years where we are almost collaborators. When I think of sculpture now I think in terms of installation. So if we are making a sculpture of a buffalo, and I have 25 students, then the sculpture becomes automatically an installation of a heard of buffaloes. I see that when I direct them now is almost a symbiotic process we need each other in order for the artwork to come to exist. This does not happen without mayor challenges mainly the fact that as an artist you sort have to work within the relatively restrictive and regimented time schedule of the public school system, but thanks to Studio in A School and the Collaborative Community Initiative of which my school is now a part of we are slowing changing the culture of the school as the arts are becoming a central tool for learning."

How does it feel when you see your students' art work shown in prestigious art spaces and museums?

"One of my students work Nibras Choudhury self portrait was included in the PS art 2008 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I am thrilled with the exposure that my students are getting, because I really see that children art has an incredible potency that needs to be recognized and validated. It was wonderful to see their work framed professionally, their enthusiasm and the fact that they can experience that being an artist today is not a myth or a delusion but a real possibility within their reach."

What do you make of the New York contemporary art scene?

"The New York scene is exciting and while the city is always incredibly competitive is also incredibly inclusive...there are so many opportunities it just takes the energy to look for them and the time to make the artworkbut there is virtually a market for every type of work...it is just a bit overwhelming to navigate sometimes."

What scares you in life?

"What scares me is the dispersion of energy ...I am interested in so many things and New York offers so many things that while I constantly try to possess her I find myself never fully able to do so...this tension is what keeps me interested and constantly challenged...what scares me is to settle and never move again...I am beginning to feel that the tension of the movement and the precariousness of the uncertainty of the future provides a state of alertness and allows me to live the present fully...also if a boat has no anchor and keeps moving then the tiding will never drown it, so even if I am not necessarily moving to maintain the elasticity and the willingness to constantly adjust to new situations and a sense that I have not arrived yet...is what keeps me on the edge and this tension produces a creative impulse...that of making the best of the limited tools we have at the



moment...teaching makes you really good at this.”

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