



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (KK) Kate Kruckemeyer, ()

Accession Numbers:

KK-05-05-FN

Fieldnotes

KK-05-05-C

Audio recordings

KK-05-05-D

Photographic documentation

KK-05-05-M

Additional materials

Initial Contact: 8/11/2005 Contact Date: 10/18/2005

Related Accession Numbers: - - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: Angel Sanchez Ortiz ("Junior") with Zulma Cabral

Address: [REDACTED]

City: [REDACTED] Zip: [REDACTED] County: [REDACTED]

Phone: Daytime [REDACTED] Evening:

E-mail: [REDACTED] Website:

Contact person: Zulma Cabral (wife)

Title:

Location of Interview: their home, as above

Street Address:

City: Zip: County:

Special Needs (including translation): Junior is studying English now; Zulma can function as a translator

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): Angel Sanchez Ortiz' vejigante mascararas (masks) and vejigante-themed crafts

Traditions noted for follow-up: Zulma is a dollmaker and a practitioner or santeria

Other Possible Contacts: Carlos Santiago Arroyo, santos carver; others listed below

Summary Description: Please note that there are digital photos (KK-05-05-D) associated with this accession as well as a smaller number of color slides (KK-05-05-CS). Because the digital photos are of higher quality, I refer to the digital photos except when there is only a color slide of an item.

For a number of years both Jessie Payne and I had heard rumors that there was a vejigante mask-maker in the Springfield area, but no one had ever given us a precise lead and we had not been able to find him ourselves. Luckily, I happened to meet Angel Sanchez Ortiz (“Junior”) and his wife Zulma Cabral while attending one of the “Caribbean Walk” events in Holyoke during August 2005. They were on High Street in Holyoke at this event selling his masks. I had been attending the performance by Enchanted Circle Theater with my toddler, which ended with a dance by a woman in a vejigante mask. The dancer was Zulma. After the performance I asked her about the origin of her mask, and she brought me down the street to meet Junior. Apparently another MCC employee met him under similar circumstances and passed on his contact information to Maggie Holtzberg as well. After speaking with Junior and Zulma, it seems our multiple meetings with him this summer were not co-incidental. While he was very active as a mask-maker in this area about ten years ago, he has only recently begun to return to his craft in earnest, for reasons that are explained below.

The taped interview gives some background on how Junior took up this craft. In short, he became interested as a child. Many children in his neighborhood of Ponce were interested in the masks that were worn at Carnival time, and he learned how to make the masks “in the streets.” He had an interest in and gift for many types of art as a child, so it seemed natural to him that he worked hard on the masks and his talent was recognized early. He seems not to have had any specific mentor but rather many inspirations and a rich environment in which to hone what was essentially a self-taught skill. He became very involved in Carnival in Ponce through his youth.

There are three centers for vejigante mask-making and Carnival in Puerto Rico: Ponce, Loiza, and Hatillo. (Dr. Jenoure pointed out that Ponce and Loiza are not coincidentally also the centers of African influence in Puerto Rico.) For Junior, the mask style of Ponce, which is made with paper mache, is particularly important. He speaks repeatedly of the importance of paper and paper crafts to his idea of Puerto Rican culture that he would like to hand down to young people here (anecdotally I hear that a very significant percentage if not the large majority of Puerto Ricans in the Pioneer Valley area are from the Ponce area). For him, paper mache is central to mask-making, but is also a foundation for many other types of artistic expression. He explained that he is also able to make masks in the style of Loiza (masks made on a coconut shell) and Hatillo (on a wire frame), but Ponce style is his specialty.

A word about terms used: the “vejigante” is the person wearing the mask (or the character itself); the mask is “una mascara”; the artist, like Junior, is properly called “el artesano” rather than “el vejigante.” The name “vejigante” comes from “la vejiga,” which is the bladder—the vejigantes traditionally carry bladders (this is the thing that dangles from the hands of some of Junior’s sculptures) as they chase people. Some of the masks/characters have specific names as well. El Rey Momo (KK-05-05-CS4) is the big, round humanoid head; El Rey Momo is like the king of Carnival, and he is buried on the last day of the Carnival. La Malla, which can be seen in KK-05-05-D21, is named for a kind of net, because, Junior says, it gathers together all of the other masks. In the interview, Junior also mentions his mask of El Chupacabras that he did in 1997. Out of curiosity I looked this up online, and Wikipedia says the Chupacabras legend began in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s, so this would have been both “Puerto Rican” and very much part of popular culture in 1997. [See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chupacabra>]

In the interview, Junior describes some difficulty he has had with people here in the States wanting to learn from him (and in some extreme cases use his masks) for personal gain without giving him any credit. One experience in the late 1990s where a group used his work, won a big grant, and then shut him out, particularly soured him for a while on continuing to practice his craft here. He describes his lack of English skills as a detriment here—people think it is easier to have him show an English speaker how to do the work and then they continue without him, but then they want to come back to him for help when the process proves too hard. He is currently studying English to try to help with this. He has tried over the years to always get written affirmation of what he has done so that he had a record of who he works with—unfortunately the group which particularly ill-used him did not provide him with any record, so he can’t remember who it was. This difficulty had a very disheartening effect on his work and caused him to withdraw from the public eye for a number of years. He credits his return in part to Angel Nieto, who asked him to take part in the exhibit Terry Jenoure curated at Augusta Savage Gallery last spring. He now has renewed hopes and goals for bringing his art to the public and in particular for using it to help keep Puerto Rican culture alive for the community. He has been and remains especially interested in using art to help keep young people connected to their community and out of gangs. He has done some work in the classroom in the past year (in particular in a summer program at Holyoke Community College) and would love to continue that work elsewhere. He would be a wonderful match for artist-in-the-schools programs, particularly if translation can be provided.

Our interview did not go into many of the specifics of mask-making given time constraints and also my awareness that part of the problem in the past has been people trying to take his knowledge of the

process. In general, however, Junior described his masks as being initially built on forms: sometimes he uses plaster forms such as the one seen in KK-05-05-D9, and some others begin on balloons or basketballs. The base mask is added to, most often with horns, protruding eyes, articulated jaws, etc. Many of the horns are also built on forms, either actual animal horns or forms he constructs out of other materials like foam covered with tin foil. Once the mask is built, he paints them. We did not speak much about the symbolism of color or paint style, but I know that there is an element of this at play as well. In addition to masks, Junior makes many other large and small figurines representing the vejigante. He also paints pictures reflecting the vejigante and other aspects of Puerto Rican culture.

This is the text of the description of his work from the exhibit at Augusta Savage Gallery, written, I believe, by Terry Jenoure:

“Angel Sánchez Ortíz was born in Ponce and raised in Barrio San Antón in Puerto Rico. He grew up living the traditional Carnival festivities in February each year. During this time, family and friends were immersed in the celebration heralding the beginning of Lent. These festivities are more vibrant in the poorer areas of Ponce. He participated in the making of masks and costumes as they got ready for the Carnival in the Calle Cuatro, Bélgica, Cantera and Playa de Ponce. These masks are made out of papier-maché and depict animals with fantastic imagery. Angel Sanchez Ortiz made his own masks at the age of seven after observing artisans such as Mariano, Geño and others. By the time he was nine years old he had completed several other masks with vivid splashes of color and curved horns with the encouragement of his art teacher. He always played a role in the Ponce Carnival where he could display his work, full of expression and color. It gave him great pleasure to see children running, at times scared or mischievous, but most of all, always smiling and living their tradition. Sánchez Ortíz continued his craft after immigrating to the Pioneer Valley in 1989, teaching children and adolescents this cultural tradition through workshops and other activities. He has exhibited his work at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, the Spanish American Union, Worcester Art Museum, Wheeler Gallery at Umass, and Holyoke Community College among other places. The use of masks to perform religious and secular rituals has been present for thousands of years in various cultures. Masks often represent gods, ancestors, animals or historical characters. Today’s Puerto Rican masks are the result of a blend of the African, Spanish and native Táíno cultures. The Africans who were forced to come to the island as slaves, brought with them a rich and ancient tradition of wearing masks during rituals. Throughout the centuries mask-making adapted to the island’s unique Caribbean culture, especially in the coastal towns where the African population predominated. In places like Loíza Aldea and Ponce the influence of traditional masks and their preparation continues to be strong. While the masks from Loíza are created using coconut shells, the ones from Ponce use papier-maché. Vegigante masks, as they are called, along with costumes, are

still used during festivals. Sánchez Ortíz embraces his Puerto Rican roots through the creation of colorful masks in the style of his beloved Ponce. He has brought his inspired work to his birth community of Ponce, and now to Latinos in Holyoke and Springfield. His goal is to keep this tradition alive and relevant to Puerto Rican generations today.”

[from: <http://www.umass.edu/fac/calendar/augusta/events/CarlosSantiago.html>]

Zulma Cabral is a great supporter of her husband's work and was happy to translate for him and to encourage him to talk about his craft. In addition, I think it would be good to talk more with Zulma herself if time permits. Before I left their apartment, I noticed a series of small altars by the front door and asked Zulma about them—she is a Santeria practitioner and would be happy to speak about this. In addition, Zulma often dances with Junior's mascararas (as in the first time I met her; she is also the right-hand figure in the photo on KK-05-05-M1). Moreover, although I did not realize this at the time I spoke with Zulma, Terry Jenoure pointed out to me that Zulma is herself a doll-maker, which is a tradition that Terry feels has strong roots in Puerto Rican culture.

Angel Sanchez is a skilled artisan, a charming person, and a strong advocate for transmission of Puerto Rican culture through mask-making and other paper crafts. I would strongly recommend him for artists-in-the-schools programming, exhibits, demonstrations, grants, etc.

Other contacts mentioned:

The following community contacts have been helpful to Junior and Zulma in their work, and may have other ideas about artists to document:

Angel Nieto (formerly of Holyoke Creative Arts Center?): I haven't been able to track him down yet, but he is the husband of Prof. Sonia Nieto at U.Mass, whom I have met before

Dr. Theresa Jenoure, Director of Augusta Savage Gallery [REDACTED] Junior says she is good to work with

Myrna Ocaña is an art teacher in Springfield schools; 10 years ago, Junior had a good experience working with her (and one other woman in the same school whose name he can't remember)

He is currently trying to put together some work with Nueva Esperanza in Holyoke

Puerto Rican artists:

Carlos Santiago Arroyo, santos carver [REDACTED], was part of the exhibit at Augusta Savage with Junior; they speak quite highly of him

Carmen Padilla – Junior and Zulma did not know how to reach her, but she had been at an event they were at (I believe one of the Caribbean Nights in Holyoke) and she exhibited “artisanias typicas”— household decorations; they gave me a newspaper clipping with a picture of Carmen with a number of items including painted wooden plaques and (clay?) fruit and vegetable figurines; I believe that Solutions CDC might know how to reach her since they were lead organizer on the Caribbean Nights