

'I do not want to paint anything other than Panama' 2/2/11 - 11:44 PM

The pollera, the montuno, the marine activity, the Canal, the vendors and the city prints that this country offers every day constitute the juice that has fed for more than 50 years the art of this American-Panamanian painter. •

Egbert Lewis

The life of Al Sprague is as intense and colorful as his artistic work. At 72, this painter of American parents who was born in the community of Balboa in the old Canal Zone, recognizes that when young was not very bright for academic issues and his proclivity to get into trouble led him to the path of art in the one that has reaped immense satisfactions.

Al Sprague is back in Panama to present at the Museum of the Interoceanic Canal a retrospective of 55 years of artistic work, during which he dedicated himself to painting the best of Panama, its people. We found the septuagenarian painter in the museum lobby at the agreed time, shortly before he started a talk. He got up from his seat driven by the cane that, by necessity, now accompanies him everywhere and immediately began communication. It makes us see at once that a good part of his childhood and youth was spent in Columbus and that although he is "fulo" he is considered a "colon boy". No doubt, he is a man in a good mood.

On the way to the elevator, which would lead us to the room where the exhibition "Al Sprague: Retrospective of 55 Years in Art" is being held, it interrogates us -with a certain fascination- about our origins. Halfway through we let him know that appearances are deceiving and that, although it is strange to him, neither we nor our parents belong to Columbus. –

My dad is a Chirican-, we inform him. Then came the theme of the language. Above all he was interested to know if we mastered the language of Shakespeare, since he preferred that the interview be in those terms. In the midst of jokes and smiles, we finally arrived at the fourth floor where his paintings, sculptures, drawings and engravings awaited us. They speak for themselves and tell, without words, the story of this "American-Panamanian", as he himself identify But the purpose of the meeting was to hear something from the story .

D: Where were your parents from?

D: Any memories of your childhood in Panama?

Al Sprague (AS): Sure. I would have a year, more or less, when we lived in a big house, one of those in which twelve families lived and I remember when I was crawling, I also remember seeing and hearing the train. After we moved to Colon, where there were many blackouts, so you could not have the light on for fear of sabotaging the Canal, since we were in time of war. Later I understood that it was thought that the Japanese or the Nazis could attack at any moment.

D: Where were your parents from?

AS: My dad was born in Brooklyn, in a neighborhood that was very similar to El Chorrillo, and my mother lived in Manhattan. Then they came to Panama to work and they grew little by little, although before they had some difficulties. I remember that my mother made guinean sandwiches for a Mr. De León to take them to work and when he went to the cafeteria he asked for hot water and a separate tea bag. He poured tomato sauce into the water and drank it like soup and kept the tea bag to bring it home and take it later. They were difficult times and we saw them and shared them with the people.

D: Did they always feel accepted by the people here?

AS: Sure. For example, many women who came from the Caribbean were working as domestic workers. I was taken care of by one with whom we still have relations with their relatives, even retired working with my family. She took me for a walk so that the other women could see me, and since she was "fulo", when she took me back home, she would arrive with her face marked by lipsticks. This is a form of acceptance, of affection. They loved us and we loved them too. I think the first "language" I learned was "the Jamaican"; from so much listening to them (them), I ended up talking like them. - "Tanc yu" -, he laughs.

I remember with satisfaction that, being at Balboa School, a teacher expelled me and then I returned there to teach art for 10 years.

D: Well, I already have an image of your personality. Now tell me why your effort to paint scenes from Panama and the Panamanians?

AS: This country has a representation of all the people of the world. I really wanted to paint people, I like it. I visited Océ to paint the montunos; I like the Canal, the fishermen, the sellers, the sea, everything. I do not want to paint anything other than Panama. I will paint it forever, until the end. day: In some way you have captured something of the history of Panama in this pictorial journey that goes beyond half a century?

AS: There is something of that. I remember going to El Chorrillo with a friend. Imagine two white men, two gringos. But we were safe, we shared with people, we even went fishing with them; We saw them in full operation, it was a great experience.

D: How did you choose the models?

AS: The majority is based on photographs. I used several photographs to put together a painting. From one he would take out his hands, from another his face and so on. Every time he left, he would draw people. I have what I call my "Book of Ideas", in which I have captured the strokes that help me to create my sculptures. I am writing a book and I advance with illustrations with sketches that have as dominant images sharks, coconuts, the sea, dogs, birds and others. gave

AS: Pride, no, but I am happy for what I have done. I wonder why me and not another? And the answer is that I can not do anything but paint.

D: Is it in your blood?

AS: Yes, it's like having malaria (laughs again).

D: You say you want to live in Panama again. Colon?

AS: Colon, chop! Too much of a crook. It is a really beautiful place; I want one in Balboa, but I have no money (he says in Spanish in the middle of a laugh). Once I proposed to a high authority to give me a house in Balboa to live. There I also had plans to create a free art school and when I was not there, it would be like a museum, but he ignored me, it was very stupid to understand the importance of the proposal he was making.