

Miami Cubans

Art by Elio Penso

One aspect of Miami that does not escape a visitor is the proliferation of art galleries and activities related to the arts that go on in the city. The last 45 years have seen a steady influx of Cuban artists who have brought to the city their talents and artistic abilities, as well as their hard work in pursuit of their art.

One such artist is Elio Penso, a renowned photographer and talented artist who has lived in Miami since he came from Cuba. He came here as a young man of 17 in the Peter Pan program that brought thousands of Cuban children to the United States in the 1960's as their parents sent them off from the Island alone fearing for them and for their lives in Cuba. Elio, who has made not only a name for himself in the community, but who has been able to devote his life to his art, is a consummated photographer who has also explored all kinds of venues where his creativity has produced pieces of extreme beauty and enchantment.

A few days ago we had an opportunity to visit Elio in his home in Coconut Grove and were treated to an evening of sheer delight. Nothing is as gratifying as visiting the home of an artist, especially an artist of such intensity and love for his work as Elio.

Upon entering his home, Elio welcomed us with chagrin because hurricanes Katrina and Rita had all but destroyed the lush gardens that surrounded his house. Tall shady laurels and thousands of orchids had been destroyed and lay piled up for the city trucks to pick them up and haul them away. However, our mood was immediately elevated when we entered his living room.

Elio greeted us with a collection of photographs he had just brought back from northern Spain and Portugal and was about to frame them in a unique series of frames he had been collecting and restoring for years. Each frame had been chosen to enhance and beautify the photographs. After we spent a time admiring the collection we noticed a center table where there stood an array of candles in different shapes and colors, some in the shape of pyramids, others in the shape of obelisks and others in odd triangular or rounded shapes. Elio had been experimenting with candle-making techniques and had produced the loveliest display of candles.

This man's artistry, however, does not stop there. I could feel his excitement when he warned us he had a surprise for us in his study. We had already heard of his work in stained glass, but we could not have suspected the unique beauty of the pieces he showed us.



He had taken the art of stained glass, once highly developed in Cuba during the 1950's, in a quantum leap to the XXIst century. He shapes glass as a sculptor shapes clay, in shapes, shades and plays of light where the art of jewelry making combined with motifs from Cuba, mythologies (Asian and Egyptian) and abstractions of beautiful women, objects and nature touched by his art, creativity and craft produced three dimensional pieces the likes of which we had never seen before. Elio's love of beauty, talent and hard work had once again rewarded us with a memorable aesthetic experience.

As we sipped a cup of hot tea, an infusion made with fruits and flowers from the Patagonia, Elio, who is also a gifted conversationalist, told us stories of his childhood in Cuba,

of how he had, at the age of twelve, wanted to attend the famous San Alejandro School of Fine Arts in Havana, of his dreams of becoming an architect, and of how very early on, while experimenting with his father's camera, he had found photography. Years later, he proudly told us, he had received a degree in Fine Arts from the University of Miami.

Elio, who was born in Cuba, comes from a Sefardic Jewish family who had made Cuba their home back in the 1920's. However, Elio thinks of himself as a citizen of the world with the mission of sharing the beauty that he sees through his art, which he considers a privilege.

