

FAREWELL, XAVIER

Xavier Gonzalez
1898-1993

XAVIER SEEMED TO SPEAK with his eyes which were soft, strong, warm, and mischievous. He liked to talk about human foibles and possibilities, and would visualize ideas and express them in images. Perhaps his ready access to those images was a source of his hopefulness.

My most treasured Xavier moment was a collaboration between us in designing a necklace for my wife, BJ. I drew a series of stick-figure birds of the kind I use in my cartoons and he reproduced them in the gold necklace, conferring on the birds an unaccustomed elegance, and on me, equally unaccustomed, if tongue-in-cheek, artistic recognition. We managed our joyous collaboration in a couple of secret evening sessions: I would go out for my evening dog walk, then quickly smuggle our standard poodle into a taxi and head for Xavier and Ethel's Central Park South apartment, then return by taxi, with BJ knowing nothing of my mission, though she did once comment on the long dog walk.

BJ in turn colluded with Xavier when she presented me on one of my birthdays with his extraordinary statue of St. Simeon Stylites. BJ meant this fifth-century hermit monk to stand for dedication to one's life task, and the sculpture, created with both love and fierce energy, certainly represented that for Xavier.

Xavier lived his life, did his work, and offered his love. And of course, the necklace and the sculpture keep him actively in our home. But I miss the man, and those mischievous eyes.

— ROBERT JAY LIFTON

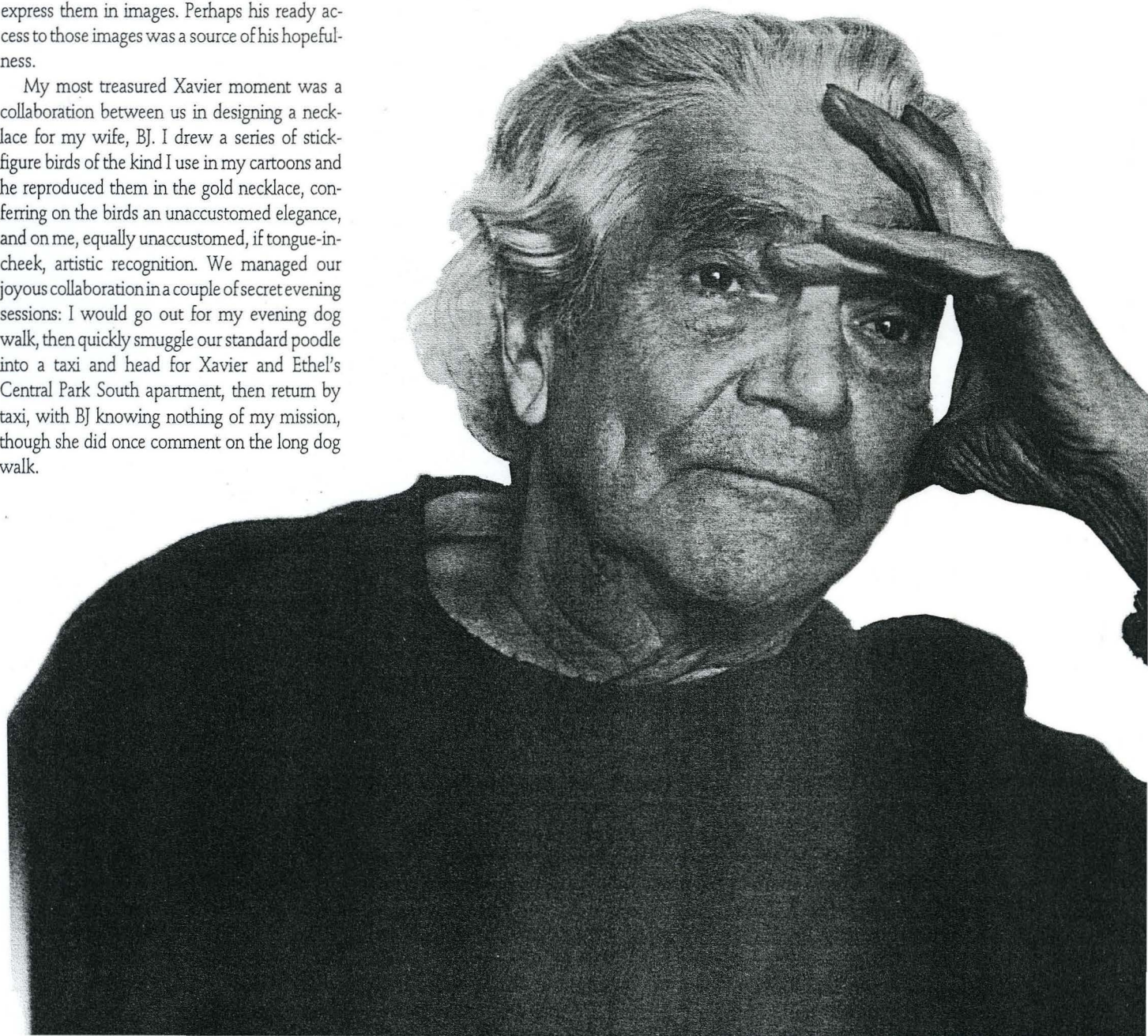
IT'S FAIR TO SAY Xavier lived for his beautiful Ethel and his art. His love for her and his output of work were both enormous. Having said that, let's go. He was truly a Renaissance artist. He excelled in watercolor and oil, sculpture, jewelry, even paper cut outs which he

began as a child. A huge book on the art and life of Xavier is due. Also, let's not forget the master teacher.

Some anecdotes about this remarkable man: first, as a child, he told me, he received comic strip pages from an uncle in America, which his mother read to him. He learned English from them—his favorite being the Katzenjammer Kids because the dialogue was heavily, richly German-English.

To keep him quiet and busy as a child, his mother gave him scissors and paper to play with. He started cutting out figures—the beginning of the artist. He continued with paper for years, creating beautiful work in the medium, including a paper-illustrated book about the great hero, Gilgamesh.

In the '30s in Paris, he was a colleague of his fellow Spaniard, Picasso, and a friend of Gertrude Stein. She told him that "only you Spaniards



know how to do abstract art," and further told him that "if you stay in Paris, I'll make you bigger than Picasso." "Unfortunately," Xavier told me with a grin, "I didn't stay in Paris."

Xavier had yarns about the early days in Paris with Picasso. Though not yet famous, Picasso was highly admired by his young fellow artists. A young German artist came to Picasso for a critique. Picasso was so brutal in his critique that the German hanged himself on Picasso's door knob, causing some confusion for the police.

Sometime in the '50s, Xavier was mounting an exhibition at a museum in Florida. Picasso's "Guernica," then in the Museum of Modern Art, was being shipped around America for showing. When it came to Xavier, it was not on a frame because of its size, but was rolled up. Stretching the famous painting, Xavier saw that the bottom foot of the canvas had been frayed. So he repaired that part and repainted it. He told Picasso about that later but Picasso, Xavier said, "only shrugged. Not concerned."

There are many more stories, endless, but they will have to wait for that great biography. I loved the man, his art, the friendship, his wit. As he lay dying in Wellfleet in August of 1992, I visited him. He was weak and could hardly speak. As I bent down to hear him, he said, "When I was alive..." He paused. "Oh, I'm still alive."

I miss him.

— LEE FALK

I MET XAVIER in 1985 when I entered his class at the Art Students League. There were about 15 people in the class and each had their own area in which to set up still lifes and paint. The atmosphere was of a family and yet very intense. Xavier would come in twice a week and his visits were anxiously awaited. He would come in quietly, replace his coat with a blue smock, and slowly work his way around the room discussing the paintings in progress, the problems, the different solutions, the strong points. His comments always presented, as an alternative, another way of seeing the still life or the model. Often he would sit down and do a sketch or a watercolor to show his own interpretation. The class soon gathered to learn from the demonstration, and when we returned to our own work we could see through fresh and inspired eyes. Sometimes he would tell stories from his life; about certain murals, and the problems and solutions of execution; about his days painting with his uncle Jose Arpa, traveling through Texas and New Mexico in a Model A Ford fixed up to hold stacks of paintings; about his conversations with Gutzon Borglum, his time working in Paris, or the process of making a mural of polyester resin. In one of his sketch books, Xavier recorded a passage from D.H. Lawrence: "Life is beautiful, so long as it is consuming you. When it is rushing through you, destroying you, life is glorious. It is best to roar away like a fire with great draught, white hot to the last bit. It's when you burn a slow fire and save fuel that life is not worth having." Xavier lived consumed.

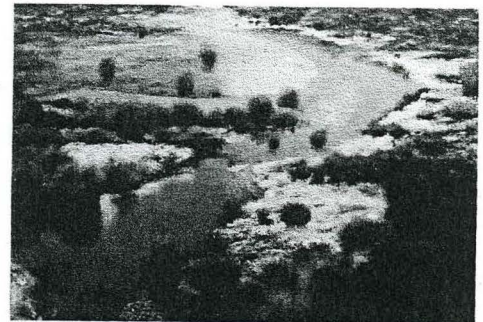
In teaching, Xavier had an ability to see to the heart. When I would face the canvas in total confusion, he would always say the right thing to get the process flowing, to enable me to continue with a little more clarity, a little more confidence. I would often arrive in class to find a note of encouragement taped to my palette. In a 1946 *Arts Digest* interview, Xavier said: "To my mind, it is the Oriental ability to lose personality and become an integral part of nature that is the ultimate creation. There is the danger of creative effort degenerating into mere calligraphy if the mechanical limitations of human beings are not taken fully under consideration. We must constantly be on guard against mannerisms and search somewhere between what the hand can do and what nature does."

The summers we shared together in Wellfleet were times of painting and sculpture, long talks about work and adventures, of life. Most evenings were spent sitting on the terrace with a glass of champagne, watching the locusts in the wind, seagulls, and airplanes. Tortillas for breakfast and, when our constitutions could handle it, PJ's onion rings for lunch.

Light and dark, *chiaroscuro* in life and in work. The spirit of drama, of Goya, the keen vision of Cervantes. A marsh seen through all the senses, the murky passages of the spartina, the brilliant intricacies of color and reflection of the mud. To smell and taste the salt, to hear the rustle of the grass, of the crabs. A model in the studio painted as flesh on the canvas. Not just to paint, but to consume, to seize the essence, to love. Not just to see but to really *see*. More formally, Xavier said, "At the beginning of a painting our graphic concepts are so amorphous that we bring a purely physical performance, adjusting our endeavors toward the understanding we have acquired of the rhythms of nature. Gradually these forms, textures, and colors spring alive. By simply withdrawing the superfluous elements or framework, the painting is resolved, and we get to the saturation point."

Xavier shared his knowledge, wisdom, and love without hesitation. When I think of immortality through the passing of spirit from one generation to the next, I think Xavier will live for a long time to come.

— JIM JONES



XAVIER GONZALEZ
"THE MARSHES"