

When Art Is the Family Business

“It’s more about what’s going on metaphysically and feeling good about each brushstroke you put down.”

By Mark Segal | February 4, 2016 - 11:48am

The long and winding road from Uruguay to East Hampton has taken Aurelio Torres to many places conducive to two of his passions, painting and windsurfing.

“A great place to windsurf is just north of Saigon,” he said during a recent conversation at his house in the woods off Three Mile Harbor Road. “I traveled there twice, and I took my painting rig with me both times — the easel and sketchbooks and watercolors — and it was a wonderful experience. The people there were just enchanted when I took out a pad and started drawing. There is a magic to going to another place and being able to paint.”



Aurilio Torres took a break from his studio in the woods outside his East Hampton house. *Morgan McGivern*

He has also been to Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Japan, Hong Kong, and throughout Europe. The Mayan ruins of Central America, including Chichen Itza, Tulum, and Copan, have been especially important to him.

“I work from architecture a lot,” he explained. “In Europe, the Gothic cathedral in Cologne, for example, and in Barcelona, all the Romanesque and Gothic churches really inspired me. Each place adds a little something, a little flavor to the work.”

He was born in Montevideo in 1962. “We grew up in this wonderful house, with a beautiful view of the water. My father built it, and it was two blocks from my grandfather’s house.” His father, Horacio Torres, was an artist, as was his uncle, Augusto Torres, and his grandfather, Joaquin Torres-Garcia, whose retrospective exhibition is on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York through Feb. 15.

“It was a very quiet time in Uruguay in the 1960s and early 1970s. The country was doing well, and we grew up around a lot of art. My grandfather had passed away, but my father was well into his artistic career. It was the family business.”

Two events brought the Torres family to New York City: The Guggenheim Museum was having a retrospective of his grandfather’s work, and a military coup took place in Uruguay in 1973. “I remember soldiers in full fatigues patrolling the streets. My father wanted to liberate us from that. I was in third grade when we came to New York. I went to public schools and didn’t understand a word of English the first year. I just drew. That was my way of getting by.”

The family eventually settled in SoHo, where their visitors included the critic Clement Greenberg. “He would spend afternoons at the loft. My mother would bring out a bottle of vodka, and by the time he left, the bottle was empty. He admired my father’s work a lot. He was a charming man and a wonderful writer.”

Horacio Torres died of cancer in 1976 at the age of 51. “It was a shame, because he was rising. He had just had a retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and was doing bigger and bigger canvases.” While still in his teens, the younger Torres studied drawing in New York with a friend of his father’s who had also been a pupil of his

grandfather.

“I didn’t want to do anything else besides art, but it took me a long time.” It wasn’t until his 20s that he decided to “learn the school of my grandfather — the foundation, the technique of drawing.” He moved to Barcelona to study with his uncle Augusto, whose students included Caio and Bruno Fonseca.

“Barcelona was a very bohemian town in the 1980s. I absorbed a lot of what my uncle had to teach. I was there for 10 years, but I would sometimes follow him to Uruguay.”

Mr. Torres often paints en plein air. “When I paint outside I mostly try to get it all done on site. I find being out there a magical moment. If I think the painting is unfinished, I go back on a day when the light and weather are the same.” His plein air paintings are not extremely detailed. “It’s more about what’s going on metaphysically and feeling good about each brushstroke you put down. Though sometimes it doesn’t feel good at all.”

After his years in Barcelona he returned to New York City. “I used to come out to the East End with friends, and when I would head back to the city in the afternoon, I’d see the light and the sunset and it would make me so sad to leave at that perfect time.”

His desire to spend more time here coincided with his being priced out of studio space in the city. In the late 1990s he found a large, unheated barn to rent in Water Mill and started painting outdoors.

“I’m such a fan of marine landscapes,” he said. “I always have to paint a certain number of ocean scenes and beachscapes.” Since he was a teenager, he has also carved wooden boats. “I would go to street fairs in New York and try to sell them. I was always making toys and working with wood.”

Many of his more recent models focus on the sails. “I’m fascinated by the sails of a boat, the shapes they take when they harness the wind. I decided to put one next to the other to demonstrate the effect of random movement. At the same time, they’re very abstract.”

After 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, Mr. Torres looked for a way to express his feelings. He saw a black-and-white photograph in The New York Times of a Chinook helicopter in the desert, with its back open and troops milling about. “Something clicked in me,” he said, “and I did a whole series that was exhibited at Art Solar in East Hampton. The culminating moment for me was when a man at the opening said to me, ‘I served in Vietnam, and that’s exactly what it was like.’ ”

Mr. Torres doesn’t travel as much as he used to, in part because of concerns about the effects of jet travel on the environment. For a number of years he has worked as a baker at Levain in Wainscott. “It’s a great way to meet people,” he said, “and the other workers have been my best friends for many years. I get up early to go bake. It’s artisanal, kind of related to painting.”

He shares his spacious East Hampton house, where he has a large basement studio, with Robin Gianis, an artist who teaches art at the Bridgehampton School, and her son, two friendly dogs, and several cats. Ms. Gianis managed Barefoot Contessa for many years.

Mr. Torres is working on a new series of abstract works whose constructivist look recalls some of the paintings by his grandfather on view at MoMA. The straight lines, deployed at angles to each other on a solid ground, are made with a chop saw that scores the wood several centimeters deep. “I did some of these many years ago,” he said. “But after seeing my grandfather’s stuff, all those paintings at one time, I felt compelled to return to this series.”



"K House, Spring Evening," an East End beachscape.



"Rotors," from his military-themed series



"Lord Nelson," one of his many-masted wooden boats.



One of Aurelio Torres's plein-air paintings in progress at Emma Rose Elliston Park in North Sea.

Aurelio Torres

About the Author

Mark Segal

Arts Assistant/Reporter

631-324-0002

e-mail: mark@ehstar.com

Need to Know

[Two-Hour School Delay and More Snow on Deck for Tuesday](#)

[Cops Call for Public's Help After Theft at Speedway](#)

[Another Snowstorm, Another Snow Day for South Fork Students](#)

[Winter Storm Warning Issued for Eastern Long Island](#)

[Wounded Warrior Project Under Fire](#)