

NEW YORK OBSERVER



Johnny 1979

"People have to have time to go through stages with you," the sculptor John Ahearn explained on a recent morning, standing in his sun-filled studio in the South Bronx. "You can't just grab someone like this!" He gripped my arms tightly, then let up with a quick laugh.

Mr. Ahearn, who is 60 and classically handsome—square jaw, piercing eyes, neatly buzzed gray hair—was explaining how he and his artistic partner, Rigoberto Torres, have made art for the past 30 years. They cover their subjects' faces and shoulders with a toothpaste-like goop called alginate, the stuff dentists use to make molds, and a layer of plaster bandages. The subjects breathe through straws while the materials harden. The whole process takes about 20 minutes, and a fair amount of trust. The two artists then take those molds and fill them in with plaster to make positive casts, which they build up and carve, and paint into startlingly lifelike wall reliefs.

Next week, Messrs. Ahearn and Torres will be a few blocks south of the former's Bronx studio, on Randall's Island, casting visitors to the inaugural Frieze Art Fair as part of its "Projects" series, put on by the nonprofit Frieze Foundation. "I have

never in my entire life stepped inside an art fair," Mr. Ahearn admitted. "I always thought it was against my religion or something." He thought for a moment. "Well, I actually just felt kind of intimidated."

"My favorite social thing in the whole neighborhood happens to be right here," he said as we walked into another room of his studio, above a tire shop. He pushed open a window, letting in the sounds of buses roaring by, and people talking in front of the shop below. "This is a place of profound social engagement with everybody in the neighborhood," he said, looking down. "It's always jammed with people. There are always kids running around here."

Arrayed around the studio's walls are life casts from the past several decades: a young, grinning black girl leaping into the air, a Latina girl named Zuhey in a Betty Boop T-shirt cradling a baby doll, a group of young Puerto Rican boxers. "And here we have my lovely wife, Juanita, who was carrying our child," Mr. Ahearn said as he walked us over to a cast of a woman with a bulging stomach. His son is now almost 3.

The strangest piece was a face with lime-green skin, its eyes covered by purple hands. The face belongs to Stefan Eins, a downtown type who in 1978 helped establish a gallery called Fashion Moda in a storefront about 10 blocks north. "I went to cast Stefan there, and he had an assistant named Hector—a Puerto Rican from the neighborhood," Mr. Ahearn said. "Stefan's alien presence versus this very earthy guy, Hector, from the neighborhood, they struck me as a very interesting combination."

Mr. Ahearn and Mr. Torres may be sought after in today's global contemporary art world—they have done work in Ireland, Taiwan, Puerto Rico, Brazil and elsewhere—but their careers began in the Bronx. As Mr.

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Ahearn worked in Fashion Moda's front window that day early in 1979, a large crowd began to form. "Everybody was like, 'Whoa, I want one for myself!'" Mr. Ahearn recalled. "I told everybody, I'm coming back the next day, and we're going to do more." He made the casts at the gallery, brought them down to his East Village apartment to paint at night and then displayed them at Fashion Moda.

Early in the project, Mr. Torres, then a high school student from the area, strolled in. "I cast him just like this after I only knew him for 20 minutes," Mr. Ahearn said, pointing at a photograph of the sculpture in a book. The young Hispanic man wears a mustache and a winning smile.



Left to right: *David Ortiz (Laughing)*, 1979 and *Robert*, 1979 by John Ahearn;

"I had a good smile then," Mr. Torres, 52, said on the phone from Florida, where he now lives. "I said, let me just smile really big and see what happens." His piece ended up hanging near that of one of his cousins, who sports a huge shirt collar, bulging eyes and a wild laugh. ("He was a flashy guy," said Mr. Ahearn.)

Another cousin, a taxi driver, had heard about the guy making portraits over on Third Avenue and told Mr. Torres, who was working at his uncle Raul Arce's statuery factory, producing miniature casts of Jesus, the Virgin and Elvis that were sold at local botánicas. "It was in the family in some sense," he said. He proposed that they collaborate, and Mr. Ahearn jumped at the opportunity. Mr. Arce later taught them how to work with rubber molds and fiberglass.



Stephan with Hector, 1979

After a few months working in the space, the pair had an exhibition, which they called the "South Bronx Hall of Fame." It was a hit in the community and in the art press. ("The trip is short and perfectly safe," one reviewer noted.)

Mr. Torres, whom Mr. Ahearn calls Robert, also borrowed materials and cast people on his block. "He was using kitchen knives," Mr. Ahearn said, marveling at his partner's ingenuity. Said Mr. Torres, "For me it was kind of special to be able to let a person trust you so you could pour the stuff on their faces. You start with zero—nothing—and then you make something. You get much closer in a sense, more personal."

Mr. Ahearn moved to New York in the mid-1970s after graduating from Cornell. His identical twin brother, the filmmaker Charlie Ahearn, was already here, enrolled in the Whitney's Independent Study Program. The two were early members of Collaborative Projects Inc. (Colab, for short), a group of young artists (Tom Otterness, Jenny Holzer, Kiki Smith and scores more) who organized irreverent,

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convention-flouting shows, frequently in abandoned spaces.

He picked up his casting technique from a book about making movie masks that he found at the apartment of underground actress Patty Astor. At the time, he wanted to make a monster movie. “I thought, ‘I can make art with this stuff.’”

“They were doing it all wrong in the book,” he recalled. “Originally, they were saying you should dabble out one little scoop at a time. I just grabbed a bowl and threw the whole thing on the face at once, so it went on as one pour. I’m a really impatient person.”

In 1980, Mr. Otterness and Mr. Ahearn found a disused building in Times Square, and its landlord let them have it for a temporary exhibition with about 100 artists, including Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Mr. Ahearn and Mr. Torres showed works from the “South Bronx Hall of Fame,” and did some casting on the sidewalk outside of the show. Jeffrey Deitch, now the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, swooned over them in *Art in America*: “No matter how much art world validation they receive, the heads will always be a raw slice of South Bronx life.”

His words were prophetic. “Immediately following the ‘Times Square Show,’” Mr. Ahearn said, “I said goodbye to Downtown forever and moved to the Bronx and got an apartment in the same building where Robert had an apartment with his family.”

The two have collaborated on and off ever since, traveling to far-flung locales, but also casting people around New York. Visit Longwood in the Bronx, and you’ll see quite a bit of their work. Another cast of that leaping black girl—she’s jumping rope with other children—hangs near Rainey Park (*Double Dutch*, 1981-82), and a cast of nine people of various ages is on view above the Fox Playground (*We Are a Family*, 1981-82). Their paint has faded, but they still exude an uncanny energy—unmitigated joy from the children, a kind of blunt sagacity in the case of a tough-looking grandmother type. They are, as critic Peter Schjeldahl put it in 1981, “amplified human presences.” (They also have works at the Socrates Sculpture Park that provoked a public art controversy when they were first displayed in the early 1990s, a melee that Jane Kramer addressed elegantly in *The New Yorker*.)



Casting the “South Bronx Hall of Fame” in 1979 at Fashion Moda: Mr. Torres (left, in white shirt) and Ahearn (center) during a casting, with Fashion Moda co-directors Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis (standing in back)

Though their work has long been sold through the Alexander & Bonin gallery in Chelsea, the two artists have worked largely off the grid of the moneyed, bleeding-edge contemporary art world represented by Frieze.

“I’ve been dedicated for the last 30 years to working with communities,” Mr. Ahearn said, when asked if he worried about the commercial context of an art fair. “We’re going to take a little break from that. I think it’s liberating for the idea of who I am.” In his view, it’s just another way to get his work to a new audience.

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Homage to the People of the Bronx: Double Dutch at Kelly Street;
1981-1982

So far, a handful of people have signed up to be cast at Frieze, paying \$3,000—the going rate for a painting by an emerging artist. Among those who will submit to the goop are Soho dealer Brooke Alexander, who first began working with the artists decades ago, and High Line curator Cecilia Alemani, who is organizing the “Projects” series.

“It’s actually a really hardcore thing,” Ms. Alemani said. “I’ve never done it before, so I’m very scared.” Though the Frieze display will include a majority of works from the “South Bronx Hall of Fame,” as well as, of course, the two artists working, she said the project is intended as something more. “It’s an homage to Fashion Moda and the importance that the space had on the cultural scene in the South Bronx, but not only there.” Frieze will publish a catalogue with essays by Lucy Lippard and Walter Robinson.

In the meantime, Mr. Ahearn has been working on a frieze of a very different kind—a long pink one that now appears in a pop-up show at the abandoned Andrew Freedman House on Grand Concourse made of casts of the hands of 3- and 4-year-old kids in a nearby Head Start program.

All that work takes a toll. Before we left Mr. Ahearn’s studio, he peeled back from his thumb a smudged bandage to reveal a deep gash. “This is a really good one,” he said. “We have to get our hands dirty a little bit.”