

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART

FRANK DIAZ ESCALET (1930-2012)

BIOGRAPHY

Frank Diaz Escalet (1930-2012) was filled with a desire to make things from a young age. Almost entirely self-taught, Escalet picked up what he knew about creating art wherever he could. His story is one of invention, adversity, and resilience, but perhaps more than anything else, curiosity was the true wellspring of his work.

Escalet was born on March 16, 1930, in Ponce, Puerto Rico. At the age of four, he moved with his family to New York City, where he was raised in Greenwich Village and Spanish Harlem. Growing up in a poor, immigrant family, Escalet drew his own comic books. When he discovered that the model airplanes he designed on brown paper shopping bags could actually fly, he sold them to his friends. At the age of 13, Escalet started working to help support his family. He delivered blocks of ice, firewood, and cans of kerosene around the neighborhood before and after school and on the weekends, and would be lucky to get a nickel tip. After eighth grade, Escalet dropped out of school to work full-time factory jobs and always felt the lack of formal education. Yet, he took full advantage of whatever opportunities he had, and through perseverance, achieved success and recognition. "The more of a challenge something is," he once said, "the more fanatical I become. There's a tremendous drive within myself that I will not stop. I will not let it beat me." ¹

Escalet enlisted in the United States Air Force in 1947. After serving for three years, mostly in Texas, he briefly went to school under the GI Bill for automotive mechanics. However, when the Korean War broke out in June of 1950, he reenlisted hoping to travel. Stationed in Liverpool, England for three years where he was in charge of unloading American ships, Escalet noted, "I identified with the Irish laborers in the Liverpool docks. We would party and everything else, and I really got to know those people. I have a deep love for them." ² In 1953, Escalet married his first wife. They had two daughters, but marriage was short lived and they divorced in 1955.

After the war, Escalet returned to New York. While working in a garage changing tires and pumping gas, he took the opportunity to apprentice in coppersmithing after meeting a customer who made copper tables and lamps. Escalet then began silversmithing and opened his own jewelry shop in 1956 called, "The Talent Shop." Soon after, he moved into the more profitable leather goods and, with just \$80 in his pocket, opened a leathercraft shop in 1958 in Greenwich Village, The House of Escalet.

Escalet spent 17 years as a master leathercrafter. By the early 1960s, he had developed a celebrity clientele, designing and creating leather garments for Sly and the Family Stone, The Rolling Stones, Gary Puckett and the Union Gap, and Aretha Franklin. At one point, his shop

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was so successful that he had five salesmen working for him. The House of Escalet undertook high-profile commissions from Pablo Casals to make a leather cello case, and from the Museum of Modern Art to design and create leather cushions for the stone slab seats in the museum's sculpture garden.

In 1964, Escalet married his second wife, Marjorie, a painter who worked in oils and had some training. They moved into a large loft in the Bowery, in which Escalet built rooms so that they had living space in the center and each had a studio on either end. Marjorie recalled that Escalet would frequent jazz clubs to unwind after work. In February 1968, their son Frank Danny Escalet (Danny) was born. Concerned about raising a child in New York City, in 1971 the Escalets moved to Eastport, Maine, in Washington County, where they lived for the next 11 years.

Speaking about Washington County, Escalet remarked, "I got taken in by the beauty, I mean, it was nature in the raw, it was really fantastically beautiful up there."³ Despite the beauty of their new surroundings, these were tough years for the Escalets. They opened a shop called Pandora's Box and, for extra income, Escalet taught leathercraft to the native Passamaquoddy people through a government program. However, the social acceptance and business success they had enjoyed in New York City did not transfer to the remotest reaches of downeast Maine. There was no way for them to earn a living and they struggled to make ends meet.

Perhaps it was in response to these hardships that Escalet began making his inlaid leather compositions in 1974. Drawing on memories and personal experiences, he created bold and innovative works that speak to the joys and hardships of ordinary people. Conceived with what he called a "birds-eye-view of the world," his compositions chronicle the dignity and determination of laborers, iron workers, lobstermen, and railroad workers. Images emerged from his childhood in Puerto Rico, his time in Texas and England, and from hanging out in New York City jazz clubs. They tell the stories of his life and the lives of those around him, and reflect the experiences of immigrants, Latin Americans, and people of color. "I always portray life, the story-telling of people," he said. "Today my work tells of Latin Americans, their struggles, hopes, dreams, and sorrows."⁴

The social atmosphere of Washington County was starkly different from bohemian lower Manhattan. Whereas they felt part of the cultural fabric in New York, the Escalets were outcasts in Washington County and their son, Danny, was brutally bullied in school. When he was forced to stand on a fractured leg, the Escalets sued the town and settled out of court. Shortly after, they moved to Kennebunkport, where Escalet reestablished The House of Escalet as a gallery and studio. In 1986, Danny, who was severely depressed and had become a heavy drug user,

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committed suicide at the age of 18. Escalet attributed this act to the psychological damage his son had suffered from being bullied in school.

Heartbroken, Escalet threw himself into his work. At the age of 55, he began painting more consistently, first with his wife's oil paints and then with acrylics, which better suited his quick painting style. Instead of using an easel, he preferred to paint on his leather workbench. Escalet noted, "I paint people. I paint life. Disaster or happiness. Nothing is planned. That's how I capture things—in the spur of the moment."⁵ In the late 1980s, he also began working in sculpture using found metal pieces scavenged from building sites. Speaking on the diversity of his art practice, Escalet remarked, "as a rule, it happens by being dictated by what materials are available, what's on hand."⁶

Within a decade, Escalet was featured on three different television programs, including a 1988 episode of *La Plaza*, a Public Broadcasting program targeted at Latin Americans. In the 1990s, Escalet began exhibiting widely. In 1991, 135 of his works were selected to travel abroad in a five-year World Peace Art Tour through 7 countries and 15 museums behind the Iron Curtain. Escalet had multiple one-person shows at higher education institutions, including Rutgers University, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Pennsylvania State University. He was also included in group exhibitions at the Housatonic Museum, Bridgeport, Connecticut and the New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Connecticut.

Always mindful of the value of the education that he had missed, Escalet donated hundreds of lithographs of his work to public schools in Massachusetts, New York, and Texas in the mid-1990s. He enjoyed exhibiting at colleges and universities, and used those exhibitions as opportunities to share his story. In 1996, Escalet stated:

I have quite a track record as far as achieving things, although it wasn't quite mapped out for me. The road wasn't even paved. I want to give kids some inspiration, to bring out their talents. ... I always worked with my hands. I grabbed everything that was anything, and was able to turn it into things. ... I know there are kids going through the same things. This is to wake up a sleeping giant. The one thing about art is there is no end to it. ... You reach your goal and you are beat and exhausted, but if you just look into the horizon, there is never enough time in the day to continue.⁷

The Escalets lived in Kennebunkport for the rest of their lives. Escalet continued to exhibit locally late into his life and died February 12, 2012, a little over six months after Marjorie passed away. He is buried in the Southern Maine Veterans Cemetery.

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¹ Frank Diaz Escalet, “Mask of Solitudes: A Portrait of Frank Diaz Escalet,” interview for *La Plaza*, PBS/WGBH Boston, Nov. 3, 1988.

² Interview with Derek Fowles, “Portrait of an artist’s life: Frank Diaz Escalet paints from experience,” University of Massachusetts Amherst Student Newsletter, Sept. 29-Oct. 20, 1994.

³ Escalet, “Mask of Solitudes,” interview for *La Plaza*, 1988.

⁴ Michael R. Vosburgh, “Latin artist portrays ‘life’ in his work,” *The Daily Globe*, Worthington, Minnesota, Oct. 1995.

⁵ Jared Quinn, “MultiCultural Center Showcases African-American Exhibit Illustrating Cultural Influences,” *UC Santa Barbara Daily Nexus*, Santa Barbara, California, Oct. 8, 1999.

⁶ Escalet, “Mask of Solitudes,” interview for *La Plaza*, 1988.

⁷ Interview with Jenifer McKim, *The Boston Globe*, Nov. 10, 1996.