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City Room



Reborn in the Bronx, and Celebrating Its Identity

by [ANDREW BORYGA](#)

In April, along a grassy bank in a garden preserve in the Bronx neighborhood known as West Farms, [Nicolas Dumit Estevez](#), clothed in white robe, head nearly shaven, was baptized with the not-so-pure water of the Bronx River. Not as a Christian — as a Bronxite.

It was a rite of passage Mr. Estevez, formerly of the Upper West Side, organized to celebrate his rebirth as a native of the Bronx and kick off “Born Again,” a collection of video interviews, photographs, props and other documents testifying to the phenomenon of Bronxhood, on view at the [Longwood Art Gallery](#) at Hostos Community College through next Wednesday.

Mr. Estevez, 44, an interdisciplinary artist, lived on West 102nd Street in NYC for 12 years before moving to Longwood in the South Bronx six years ago. Friends he told of his new address responded with the uncomfortable quiet that might greet news of a lost job or relative. But Mr. Estevez has not regretted the move for a moment. “The Bronx is not a perfect place, but then again there is no such thing as a perfect place,” he said one recent afternoon.

To counter outside perceptions of the Bronx, Mr. Estevez spent six months, in cooperation with various community organizations, Bronx artists and museums, creating an exhibit that tries to map the borough’s complex identity. In doing so, said Juanita Lanzo, director of the Longwood gallery, he helped prove that the arts are alive and well in the Bronx. “It breaks the stereotype that nothing good happens here and shows that there is actually some great cultural activity going on,” Ms. Lanzo said.



Nicolas Dumit Estevez, an artist, organized a baptism ritual in the Bronx River to celebrate his rebirth as a Bronxite.

Photo: Alex Villaluz



A scene from a video of a three-day performance work by Nicolas Dumit Estevez and Linda Mary Montano. Bronx residents were asked to write messages of hope on the clothing of the performers

Photo: Nicolas Dumit Estevez

One element in the exhibition displays two mannequins outfitted in white sweat suits adorned with ink-marked sentiments of Bronx residents. They are remnants of a three-day tour in May of the borough by Mr. Estevez and another artist, [Linda Mary Montano](#), each of whom wore a sweat suit, handed out the pens to people on the street and encouraged them to write out their hopes, which included an end to structural racism, a trip to Brazil, a cure for H.I.V. and money.

Nicolas Dumit EstevezA scene from a video of a three-day performance work by Nicolas Dumit Estevez and Linda Mary Montano. Bronx residents were asked to write messages of hope on the clothing of the performers. Another work in the show compiles video vignettes of elderly men and women at [La Casa de Felicidad](#), a community center and living space for low-income elderly residents of the South Bronx.

One woman in the video, Martina Chacón, recalls riding horses at her father’s farm in the Dominican Republic as a child and her family’s dismay when she moved to the South Bronx as a young woman. But she, too, has found happiness in the Bronx. “I have found a home here,” she says, in her tomato patch inside the center, between scoops of dirt.

For a younger perspective, Mr. Estevez and other artists interviewed students from Banana Kelly High School on Longwood Avenue about their home borough. The students in the video use words like raw, gritty and tough to personify the Bronx and paint word pictures of loud music pouring from windows of tenement buildings, animated block parties. From it all arises an embattled sense of community. “Everybody has a story here, everyone has something they are going through, something they are struggling with,” one young man says, “and because of that, we are all bonded together.” That strange brotherhood among residents and cultural mix is what Mr. Estevez believes to be the Bronx’s most endearing quality and something he says he does not see in other boroughs where ethnically defined neighborhoods exist and racial tensions still arise.

On the Upper West Side, he said, he was routinely mistaken for the doorman of his building because of his Spanish accent and appearance. “People don’t have any assumptions about what I do here,” he said.

Longwood Gallery at Hostos Community College, 450 Grand Concourse in the Bronx, is open Monday through Thursday only, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

