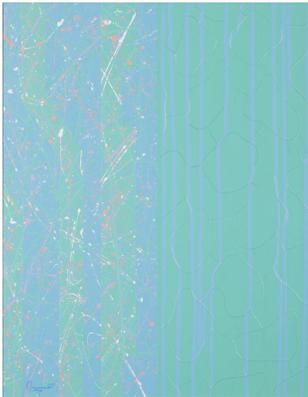




Walter Pavlo, Contributor

I write about white-collar crime.

Death Rows William A. Noguera, 'But He Was One Of Us...'



"From the Series Maximus Escapus: Untitled Opus March 9, 2013 (E. Pluribus Unum)" by William A. Noguera

As we celebrate graduations across the country, many of us take time to look back on our own lives from years ago and wonder, "What ever happened to ___ (fill in the blank)." [Facebook](#) FB -1.68% has helped many of us fulfill that curiosity with a 10 minute 'creeping' of our former classmates' profiles. I know that is all I need, no class reunions for me.

A 1983 graduate of La Habra High School (near Los Angeles, [CA](#) CA -2.02%), Melissa (full name withheld), was curious about what had become of former classmate Billy Noguera. Twenty-five years after graduating, she began looking for information on Noguera who, unbeknownst to her, was imprisoned on San Quentin's Death Row. One would have thought that finding out that information would have been enough to stop the search. He had been [charged with murder](#) in 1983 and sentenced to death in 1987. More than the tragic story, what Melissa discovered was that her old friend was a master artist who was struggling to share his art with a world who had all but forgotten him.

Melissa's thoughts raced back to the days of a handsome Noguera sitting on the hood of his Volkswagen Beetle with his black hair parted and feathered down the middle. A kid who lived 'Over The Hill', close to La Habra where Fullerton Road, Colima Road and Hacienda Blvd meet. Just like other teens of the day, Noguera could be found at the beach surfing or hanging with the kids looking over their finely polished cars. He was popular.

Those years were long gone in 2008 when Melissa [found an article](#) in the San Francisco Chronicle about [William A. Noguera](#), a man being hailed as one of the greatest artists alive and ahead of his time. Ruth Braunstein of the Braunstein/Quay Gallery was quoted in the article saying of Noguera's art, "I think the work holds up in and of itself," referring to the obvious questions that come about by any creation from someone who society has condemned. The question remains, can Noguera move beyond his crime into the world of art?

Like an old friend, Melissa knew Noguera as "one of us" and not as a monster, and certainly not as an artist. She was determined to reach out to him to reconnect after all these years to let him know that he had not been abandoned. At first, they exchanged letters to reintroduce themselves. Melissa discovered that she was the only person from the past that had ever reached out to Noguera. Twenty-five years to Noguera had been like time standing still as he recalled specific names, places and events as if they had happened only days ago. Then there was Noguera's passion for his art and his recent exhibits...only there was trouble on that front.

"William's early art representatives were reckless in the way they misrepresented and reproduced his artwork," Melissa said during a recent interview. "I knew that William was not only being exploited but he was also being taken advantage of for many years as well. I knew that I had to step in to stop all of that and help." She began by securing a lawyer, filing cease and desist orders against Noguera's former representatives and meticulously cataloging every work created. Since her efforts began in February 2009, Noguera has had one gallery showing at The New York [Law School](#). "It has been a painstaking task and I have had to learn as I go," said Melissa who knew little about the world of art when she started on this endeavor. "I was not about to turn my back on him as I had for those decades, especially when he needed support. William creates art that merits consideration from every aspect; respectable representation, as well as profound recognition from his peers and art critics. Honestly, in my wildest dreams I would never have believed it if someone would have told me that I'd be doing this, but now it's my passion and I know in my heart that I'm doing the right thing."

Melissa's priority is trying to get William Noguera's art on exhibition and into a gallery. While that has not happened yet, Melissa and Noguera will be offering two of his pieces for sale in the upcoming months. Those works entitled Untitled (WOMAN I) and Untitled Opus E. Pluribus Unum From the Series: Maximus Escapus are going to be auctioned with 100% of the proceeds going to a charity (details to follow on this blog). I spoke with Noguera by phone last week and he told me, "I know I owe a great debt to society, but I want to find ways to continuously pay it back as best I can."

With regard to Melissa's friendship and efforts to protect his legacy, Noguera told me, "Each piece being safe means everything to me. It is the difference between living and dying."