

## P.R. artist Charles Juhasz-Alvarado leads termite attack

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You know it isn't your typical art show when you're greeted at the door by five giant termites playing the congas.

They're clearly wood sculptures, but the buggy music emanating from speakers isn't reassuring. Inside, the weirdness — and playfulness — continues.

There's a three-headed aluminum horse, a shoeshine box large enough to live in, and near the ceiling, dominating the exhibit space with its 20-foot wingspan — yet another termite.

We've entered the unsettling world of artist Charles Juhasz-Alvarado. His mid-career retrospective, which runs through July 12 at Exit Art, 475 Tenth Ave. at 36th St., also is the Puerto Rican artist's first solo show in New York.

It represents 10 years of his multifaceted work with sculpture, installation and performance. Humor is one of the show's hallmarks.

"Art doesn't have to be something that's so brainy and removed from the general public," he says. One colorful installation makes fun of U.S. Department of Agriculture controls in Puerto Rico. It features photos depicting failed attempts to smuggle mangos, okra or soursops off the island.

Like much of Juhasz-Alvarado's work, it's a subtle comment on the absurdity of life on a tropical island that also happens to be a U.S. territory. The show is whimsical, but there's an undertone of protest.

One installation is organized around another wood sculpture: an armored truck with its headlights on. It seems to freeze in time a 1980s Connecticut bank robbery linked to the Macheteros, a Puerto Rican pro-independence group.

Juhasz-Alvarado's father was a Hungarian immigrant who met his mother, a Cuban-Puerto Rican, in architecture school.

The family settled in Puerto Rico, and Juhasz-Alvarado, 42, today lives in San Juan. Surprisingly, it wasn't really his architect parents who forged Juhasz-Alvarado into an artist, but his handy Cuban grandmother.

"She would take me to the hardware store to buy wood and show me how to make a table," he says. "Or I could watch her sew and be fascinated by the way she built things from cloth."

Juhasz-Alvarado's interest in construction is still evident.

"Unlike many artists who outsource much of their work, he does all of it himself," says Herb Tam, associate curator at Exit Art.

Juhasz-Alvarado's favorite medium is wood. Paradoxically, it's this affection that attracted him to termites. Though termites could chew through any of his installations in weeks or months, he sees the insects as symbols of nature's quiet efficiency and grace.

When he goes to the lumberyard to buy wood for his installations, Juhasz-Alvarado sometimes jokes with the salesmen. He tells them: "I'm just buying food for the termites."



Termite playing conga in Charles Juhasz-Alvarado's retrospective at Exit Art.