Antonio López’s Illustrated Legacy

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When I called Antonio López for the first time more than a decade ago I felt like a corporal calling on a great general. Antonio was already very famous, easily the best fashion illustrator in the world. I was one of many art directors in New York City who badgered him constantly for drawings that would uplift their publications. I wanted Antonio to illustrate a new edition of the classic tale, The Thousand and One Nights. The idea appealed to him, and he went to work immediately.

But instead of going to another world and another time, Antonio let the thousand and one nights come to him. His tales would take place in a contemporary world: New York City to be specific, 14th Street to be absolutely precise. And the heroes of his tales were a wild assortment of friends, colleagues, friends of friends and hangers-on. Antonio clothed them, coiffed them, designed their jewelry and made them up. Antonio’s people came in waves of one, two or several, day after day, week after week.

The results were The Thousand and One Nights like no other; clearly the mountain had come to Antonio. It was not merely a book of strange tales but a gallery of the late 20th Century individuals that populated Antonio’s world; a world that was strangely beautiful, vaguely ethnic, unspecified in its sexuality but nevertheless seductive in overt ways. Antonio’s people wore their costumes as panthers wear their exotic skin; Eyes half closed, panting, waiting for yet another dangerous encounter in the dark, sexy wilderness.

And yet, somehow, these people remained accessible. They were the same people who had populated his fashion drawings since the mid-sixties when he graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology and teamed with his life-long collaborator, Juán Ramos. The collaboration resulted in the best fashion illustration since the turn of the century. It graced the pages of all the major publications -- GQ, Vogue, L’Uomo Vogue, The New York Times -- and became part of the collective subconscious. Certainly Antonio’s work had found influences in the far reaches of art history, including romanticism (Delacroix), symbolism (Fuseli) and Belgian surrealism (Magritte); but the style itself was strictly New York City -- voluptuous, interracial, sexual, very 14th Street, very up-all-night.

When future generations look at his work, they’ll recognize a modern era Aubrey Beardsley, an artist obsessed with the wildest standards of beauty and style, an artist whose line can never be satisfied with its own fluidity.

When Antonio called me a couple of years later to tell me he was sick, it was the first time that AIDS hit so close to home. Antonio and I were the same age, born a few days apart. We had both worked in New York City and Paris and both had been promiscuous in our 20s and 30s. It was a terrible combination of what was fair and unfair. The pain of his death changed everyone’s life around him forever -- for his friends, friends of friends and even those sexy, mysterious passers by that inhabited his special and vivid world.

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