

by Kelly Josephsen

Cano places a white lampshade on a cluttered table and on top of it stacks an old tissue box, a miniature globe and a ceramic black cat turned to face the tools hanging on the wall.

And suddenly, on the cluttered table, there is no longer a lampshade, tissue box, globe and cat; but an elegant Japanese lady, her white skirt flowing and her shiny black hair twisted into an elaborate up-do.

That is the magic Cano, the renowned Miami marionette artist, has brought to his popular performances at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami and other locations - the most mundane everyday objects become friendly hippos, cigar-smoking Cuban troubadours and elegant 1920s flappers.

And for his next trick, Cano will turn an ordinary Saturday afternoon in Key Biscayne into a day of art and fantasy for residents young and old alike. Cano brings his popular "Musical Marionettes" show to the Community Center on Saturday, January 13 at 2 p.m.

The program, sponsored by the Village of Key Biscayne and Art in Public Places Board, is free.

While Cano's marionettes today perform to rave reviews and catch the eye of many a collector, the feedback wasn't always so positive. As a graduate student at Queens College in New York, his vision of a new kind of painting almost got him kicked out of art school.

It was then, 25 years ago, that Cano created the fanciful performance stage that he'll bring to the Key as the backdrop for "Musical Marionettes." At the time, he was submitting the structure - which he described as "a love letter in three dimensions to someone I was very much in love with" - as his thesis.

"It actually got me into a lot of trouble," he recalls. "The chair of the department didn't think it belonged in the painting college, but I thought it had the world to do with painting - it was about light, texture, three dimensions, two dimensions; about reflecting light through found objects, found color."

Fortunately, Cano said, "I've had some heroes in my life who came to my rescue."

In this case, it was formidable New York art critic Robert Pincus-Witten, an art history professor at Queens College. "He thought it was ideal for the department to have my input," Cano said. "He knew exactly where I was coming from - he really saved my neck."

In other words, Pincus-Witten understood that, instead of the traditional acrylics, oils or water colors Cano's department chair wanted students to use, the young artist's brushes and paints were the colorful objects he found on the streets of New York City.

For example, the entire stage is papered with shiny silver linings from the inside of cigarette boxes.

The idea occurred to Cano as he walked down a cigarette box-littered Jamaica Avenue on his way home from class. He started picking up the boxes one by one, and he's been doing so ever since - the nonsmoker can instantly identify whether a lining comes from Marlboros, Virginia Slims, Camels (a rare gold lining), etc. - in order to repair the wear and tear the stage suffers during shows.

In fact, in advance of the Key Biscayne show, Cano restored the stage's entire silver coat and returned the clocks that adorn the structure - one upside down and one right-side up - to working order. He is thrilled with the results, as the stage is an integral part of his performances and his life's work.

"It's been a fountain of creativity that has not ended. I'm very happy about (the restoration), because it

feels like it's alive again," he said.

The same is true of Cano's celebrated marionettes, which sing, dance, strut, twirl and bounce across the stage throughout his performances. In their time off, they can be found kicking back in Cano's Little Havana home, which is a comfortable blend of studio, collector's gallery and laid-back Miami abode.

Just as Cano's home seems to be many things all at once, so too are his performances. He said he tries to give the audience a multi-layered experience, with music, sculpture and painting all rolled together.

Each part of that experience is equally important to Cano.

Although he's made his name as a visual artist, music is a big part of his work. For example, one of his most famous marionettes, "The Cuban Crooner," sings the Cuban ballad, "El Palmar" - a song by Roberto Ledesma that features none other than Cano's father on guitar.

Furthermore, Cano only uses phonographs for his shows because he likes the intimacy and immediacy of the scratchy sound. "There's a beauty to that sound," he noted.

And he selects his music carefully, working closely with a choreographer to make the marionettes dance on cue. In Key Biscayne, Cano said he'll use a conglomeration of classic American songs, some of them humorous, some of them serious.

Cano has an equally exacting process for creating his marionettes, an idea that might seem at odds with the "found objects" basis of his work.

Indeed, Cano said one of his favorite writings is "Accidentally on Purpose" by poet Robert Frost. "It's really my philosophy in art," he said. "Found objects take a big role, and I imagine those objects becoming puppets. There's no rule of how you do it. Sometimes it happens by happy accident."

Still, Cano creates highly detailed workshop drawings of each of his marionettes, and explained, "Those are the real base of my work. That's the springboard."

Yet the ideas themselves can come seemingly out of nowhere, as evidenced by a tour of Cano's studio.

The table in the middle of the room holds the start of several marionette ants. Reconfigured doll heads give some of the ants their faces, but so too can an old emergency light or an upside-down radio, the tuning dials suddenly an insect-like nose and eyes under Cano's creative gaze.

Ceramic and glass vases form the ants' bodies, and an old patent leather purse will be good for shoes. Purse straps and electrical cords - pliable to allow for plenty of movement - will soon become arms.

Cano is creating the ants to be part of a chorus line that he'll debut in his next MOCA show in 2007, an event he's eagerly anticipating. The show will mark a full decade of performances at MOCA, and he plans a Vaudeville revue with 10 acts - an incredible strong man, vivid song and dance numbers, startling tight rope acts, amazing animal acts, etc. - to correspond with the 10-year anniversary.

"I love this concept. I'm having so much fun with it," Cano said. "Vaudeville is a natural evolution of what I'm doing, and I love their just absurd theater tradition. Some were just outlandish; off the wall."

Also, for the first time ever, Cano will be presenting a self portrait. A marionette of himself will serve as the show's master of ceremonies, and he's even considering creating a small-scale recreation of his foil-covered stage and his studio so the marionette Cano has a place to call home.

Indeed, Cano wouldn't be complete without his studio. "It provides hours of delight for me," he said. "It's part of the joy of making these things, and finding things - it's so unexpected."

Sure enough, the studio is like a treasure trove of discarded and unusual objects.

Lampshades of all colors and designs rest on the counter - they make perfect skirts, Cano said, pointing to

one with swifty fringe along the rim. He has separate containers for eyes (Santeria evil eye rings, door knobs, a dual phone jack) and noses (outlets, handles) and is constantly on the lookout for items like old jewelry, used shoes, purses, ceramic figurines, etc.

Cano used to simply gather his objects on the streets of Miami - a hotbed of found objects, he says - until he was held up at gunpoint one night. Since that terrifying experience, he has turned his attentions to flea markets, garage sales and thrift shops, Douglas Gardens being a particular favorite.

It gives Cano plenty to work with, and, fortunately, the same can be said for his fertile imagination.

Cano remembers asking himself a crucial question 25 years ago, while he was still in art school: Will the day come when creating art becomes a daily grind rather than a product of inspiration?

In response to his own question, he decided he simply wanted his life's work to be something he loves to do, something he loves to live with and something he finds fun. A quarter of a century later, all those tenets are still in place for Cano: "I've made a lot of sacrifices, but it's all been worth it," he said.

And along the way, it has provided him with a chance to open up his audience members' creative sides.

Although Cano's performances are not aimed specifically at children like a standard puppet show, he noted youngsters can make a great audience because their minds are still receptive to fantasy.

Therefore, he urges all audience members to come to his events with an open mind.

"My theatrical performances can really lend themselves to anything - comedy, tragedy, the serious, the surreal," he noted. "In some ways, I am in control of what happens on the stage, with the choreography and the music and the set structure. But the audience can definitely breathe the theater into these puppets and give them life and spirit. These dead objects suddenly have personality and come to life."

Cano said he's looking forward to bringing that sense of wonder to the Key, and he hopes his show can serve as a welcome break - a "visual narcotic" of sorts - from the day-to-day stress of modern life.

"The reason I think there is such a thing as theater is to escape that drudgery of paying bills and running errands," he said. "It's like taking a rocket to the moon without the rocket. It's a trip in the subconscious; it's a chance for human beings to escape."