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An Artistic Partnership Reunites in the Bronx

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Rigoberto Torres has been collaborating with John Ahearn for nearly 40 years, sharing credit on life-size sculptures of famous and obscure people. Credit David Gonzalez/The New York Times

Lennon and McCartney. Abbott and Costello. Siegfried and Roy. Ahearn and Torres.

Who?

In the history of creative duos, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres may not have name recognition — or money — but they have longevity. For almost 40 years the two artists have collaborated on life casts, making them from the South Bronx to Taiwan and from Brazil to Puerto Rico. Creatively, they are like John Lennon and Paul McCartney, sharing credit on life-size sculptures of famous and obscure people. Temperamentally, Mr. Torres can be reticent to the point of being more like George Harrison, the quiet Beatle.

Alexander and Bonin

Their partnership has endured through distance, even as both pursued solo projects. About 15 years ago Mr. Torres left New York for Orlando, Fla., while Mr. Ahearn continued working in his South Bronx studio. With Mr. Ahearn the one with connections to the city's art world, people sometimes forget about Mr. Torres's equal contributions to their oeuvre. But if anything, Mr. Ahearn was relieved and excited when Mr. Torres returned to his studio recently to prepare several pieces for a show in Chelsea in the fall.

"John has his own anxieties going on," Mr. Torres, 54, said with a laugh. "I'm the more relaxed one. I'm the one who fixes everything after they're broken. I'm not so anxious about things."

They met in summer 1979 at [Fashion Moda](#), a fabled gallery near 149th Street and Third Avenue in the Bronx that attracted downtown artists like [Tom Otterness](#), [Jane Dickson](#) and Mr. Ahearn, as well as local graffiti artists and break dancers. Mr. Ahearn had been making casts of people by the gallery's big storefront windows when a cousin of Mr. Torres's stopped by to check out the scene. Mr. Torres soon went to see for himself.

Sculpture ran in the Torres family — his uncle Raul had a statue factory not too far away, churning out saints and knickknacks that graced countless living rooms where plastic-covered furniture bought on installment was the major design statement. He mentioned to Mr. Ahearn that he had worked in the factory.

"I knew we were meant to work together," Mr. Ahearn, 65, recalled. "He had a poise, a sense of independence and a warm, strong, simple and clear presence. He was honest and sincere and wanted to talk about the technical aspects. He came back the next day and began assisting me with the casting."

That meeting changed both of them. Mr. Ahearn took a studio apartment in the building where Mr. Torres lived on Walton Avenue, where they would cast people on the sidewalk during block parties. Mr. Torres's skills would take him overseas to work on installations — or to help Mr. Ahearn when he got into a jam.

"John was in Taiwan doing a project with scooters and a friend called to tell me he was freaking out," Mr. Torres recalled. "I'm good under high pressure, so I went and spent a month there. When things get tough, I'm O.K. with that. I don't panic."

He may not always have been that laid back. In the early 1990s, he suffered an asthma attack that deprived his brain of oxygen for several minutes. He was hospitalized for weeks, followed by a long convalescence during which he had to relearn simple tasks. The attack came while he and Mr. Ahearn were doing a project in Times Square that had them working around the clock.

He has since learned to take it easier, even if it has unexpected results. Last year, the day of his marriage to Wanda Echevarria, he was sick with a cold and passed out in church. Undaunted, he got a chair, sat down and asked his wife-to-be to sit on his lap for the ceremony.

Alexander and Bonin

Since moving to Florida, Mr. Torres has devoted himself to his solo projects, exhibiting at a local museum, as well as doing workshops and demonstrations for students. A recent piece — of the former Tuskegee airman Richard Hall Jr. — is now on display at a show in Winter Park. Still, he knows that being in Orlando, he is far from the spotlight, working in relative anonymity.

So as much as Florida agrees with him on a personal level, he felt good to be back in New York, teamed up with Mr. Ahearn. They went about recasting some pieces and touched up some older ones. Mr. Torres spent time painting a pair of 12-year-old boxers whom he had cast in Puerto Rico years ago.

“It had been a long time, but we still got it,” Mr. Torres said. “We can still work together. We still got it. We can do one more run.”