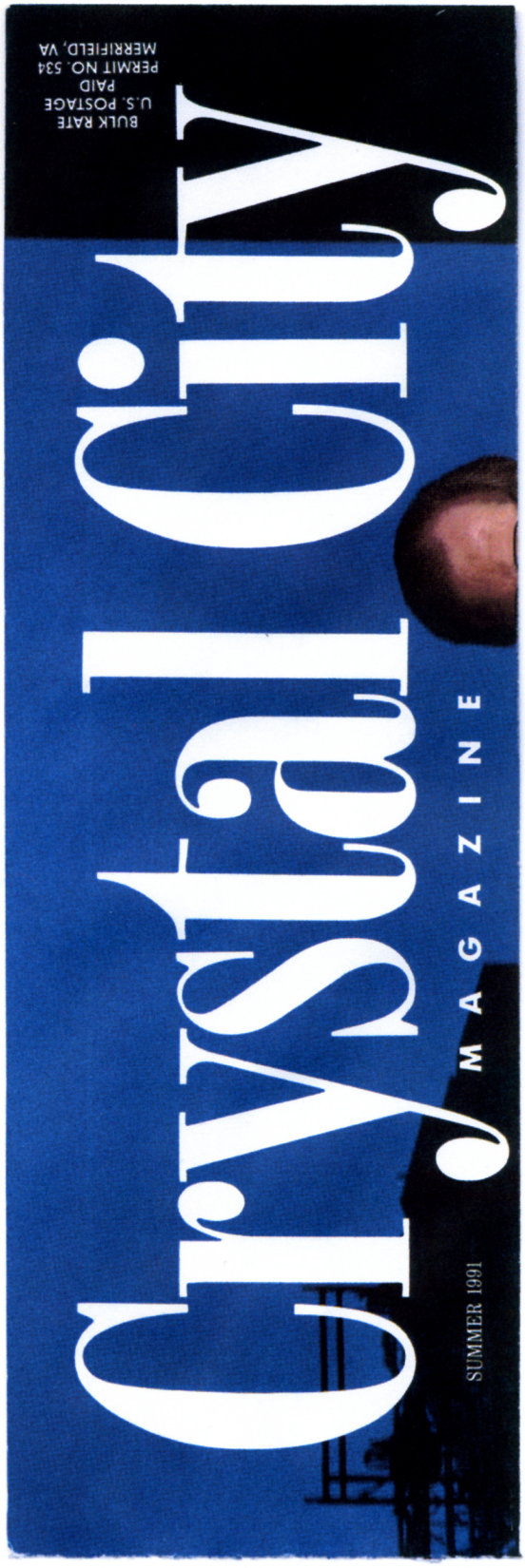

Joey Mánlapaz: An Artist Building on the Past

By Douglas McCreary Greenwood

There's one artist in Washington whose "feel" for the city distinguishes her from other local landscape painters. That's because Joey Mánlapaz paints the city that is disappearing—the older buildings that get razed by the wrecking ball—all in the name of "progress." They are hauntingly familiar institutions: the Georgetown Pharmacy, Washington Circle Market, Reeve's Restaurant, Whitlow's—at one time bustling with activity, now surviving only in memory, in faded photographs, in the confines of Mánlapaz's cluttered studio, or on the walls of those who have collected her work.

In a city like Washington, which has a rich architectural heritage, the loss of so many of its older buildings—run-down, neglected by chance, fate or choice—is nothing short of tragic. All you have to do is to look around at the buildings that somehow got saved—the old Post Office building on Pennsylvania Avenue, the Masonic building that is now the National Museum for Women in the Arts, the National Building Museum, (formerly known as the Pension Building), and Union Station.

"Whoever buys one of my paintings," Joey Mánlapaz says, "gets an original. I feel close to D.C.—I've invested a lot of time here. It was my first American city, and when my plane landed at National Airport, I knew this was home. It's something you can't really control."

For Mánlapaz, a Filipino who came to the United States in 1970 as a high school student, the sense of place is important. When the school she was attending, Immaculate Conception Academy, (on the corner of 24th and K near George Washington University Hospital), was torn down for a new condominium, she felt an immense sense of loss.

(Opposite page) "MidCity Fish Market" (1988, oil on paper), one of Joey Mánlapaz's typical street scenes, captures in mood and tenor the sense of the recent past.

In "Washington Circle Market" (1989, oil on linen), Mánlapaz recreates a scene many Washingtonians will remember, of a vital block of markets, shops, restaurants and offices that have recently disappeared from the landscape.

"Something that was so familiar was gone," she says in quiet, measured tones in her Quincy Street studio. The sadness in her voice is muted in her painting. But it is unmistakably present, not as a dominant chord, but certainly as a leitmotif. It is the same quiet undercurrent you sense in the work of the American painter Edward Hopper, a realization that says, in effect, every man *is* an island.

Mánlapaz is no stranger to this idea. She admits that her canvases often include a singular, anonymous figure. The lone figure that appears in many of her works—a sort of portrait of the artist in Mánlapaz's mind—reflects a serenity that has begun to emerge in her work. The buildings, she insists, have a certain integrity utterly lacking in many, though not all, modern structures. Indeed, if these old jumbles of brick and steel and concrete were personified, they would, Mánlapaz feels, be proud figures. She envisions them as having character, in some respects no different from people.

Joey Mánlapaz understands buildings from the outside in—hers is not just a superficial estimate. She responds to them with an interest that transcends both their architectural reality and their artistic potential. This gift may come from her own sense of family, of learning to live with a large group of people with very different talents. As the youngest of 8 children and the daughter of a dentist (who died 7 years ago), and an enterprising mother who ran an import/export business, Joey has seen her brothers and sisters do very well, indeed. Her four sisters include one M.D. (anesthesiology), an accountant at the World Bank, a dietician, and a paralegal. And of her three brothers, one is a dentist, another a lawyer, and the third, a computer analyst.

She was, by her own confession, the most spoiled of the children. And her father, knowing that most artists have a tough time, wanted her to go into a more secure field, where she wouldn't have to worry about where next month's rent was coming from.

She gave office life a try, working in real estate and other business ventures, finally succumbing to what she somewhat ironically calls the "disease"—art. After graduating from George Washington University with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, she went to France to paint landscapes and then finished a master's degree in fine arts. Her MFA thesis presentation, interestingly enough, was not in landscape, but the human figure. (It was called "Body Portraits of Women: A Search for Style" and was mounted at the Dimock Gallery of George Washington University.) Academic degrees often translate into teaching, so of course, Mánlapaz taught (and continues to teach from time to time) at the Smithsonian, Mt. Vernon College, and at Northern Virginia Community College.

Joey Mánlapaz has traveled all the familiar routes of an up-and-coming artist—she's had several one-woman shows, has been featured in numerous exhibitions and juried shows, and has won several awards. Her work is represented in private collections of the rich and famous, in banks, law offices, and corporate collections as varied as the Superior Court of the District, the Ministry of Justice in Manila, The Philippines, in United States Steel, Satellite Communications Systems, and Remington Company.

What sets Mánlapaz apart, then, is not only her vision, but a sense of the stoic beauty that inheres in the buildings she paints. There's a thin line from her perspective between being there and *not* being there, a sense of the old mortality creeping in. She doesn't quite come out and say it, but undergirding her art is a realization that buildings don't die by themselves. And in like fashion, keeping them alive—if only on a stretched canvas or a sheet of paper—requires effort, a certain amount of feeling, and the talent to make it all come together. ▪