

IMPROBABLE JOURNEY

CUBAN-BORN ARTIST ALBERTO REY GUIDES ANGLERS
TO THE TREASURED STEELHEAD OF WESTERN NEW YORK

BY WILLIAM SISSON



A Catskill brown.



he guide and the angler walked beside a lovely stream on a clear, cold day on the cusp of winter. The temperature was in the mid-20s, and ice hung from the steep bluffs, leaving me with the impression of walking through a natural cathedral. Instead of religious iconography, however, the pools and pews held muscular steelhead, a gift for the handful of hardy believers who were streamside, murmuring fish prayers and waiting for a take.

I'd driven nearly eight hours to Dunkirk in western New York to fish for steelhead with Alberto Rey, a 63-year-old, Cuban-born guide and retired art professor who in 2021 was selected as the Orvis Guide of the Year. I've known Rey by way of phone calls and emails for several years, when he first started submitting paintings, sketches and essays to *Anglers Journal*. This was the first time we'd met in person.

I'd come to learn more about Rey and to chase steelhead. The hours we spent on the stream — not to mention the rum and Cuban cigars we later enjoyed in his studio — gave me a clearer picture of this complex man and the improbable journey that led him here.

Rey is introspective and inscrutable, not because he's evasive but because his path to this small tributary of Lake Erie in upstate New York is so unlikely. His story is another variation on the elusive, ever-changing American dream. "I've always wondered," Rey says, "if I was ever going to get to this point. The peace and — it's a scary word — the contentment." He speaks carefully, like a man who doesn't want to do anything to upset his kismet.

Rey moved to Dunkirk in 1989 and accepted a teaching position at the State University of New York at Fredonia, where he taught painting. He retired two years ago as a Distinguished Professor for Research and Creative Activity, the university's highest rank.

PHOTOS AND ARTWORK COURTESY ALBERTO REY

The Guide

It's not hard to see why Rey won the Orvis guide award. He's what you hope for in a stream sage — patient, smart and sharp-eyed. "Let's try for those three fish first," he says, as we eyeball a set of riffles. Following Rey's instruction, I take six steelhead in several hours on a 6-weight, including a large male that went about 30 inches and fell to an egg pattern he'd tied.

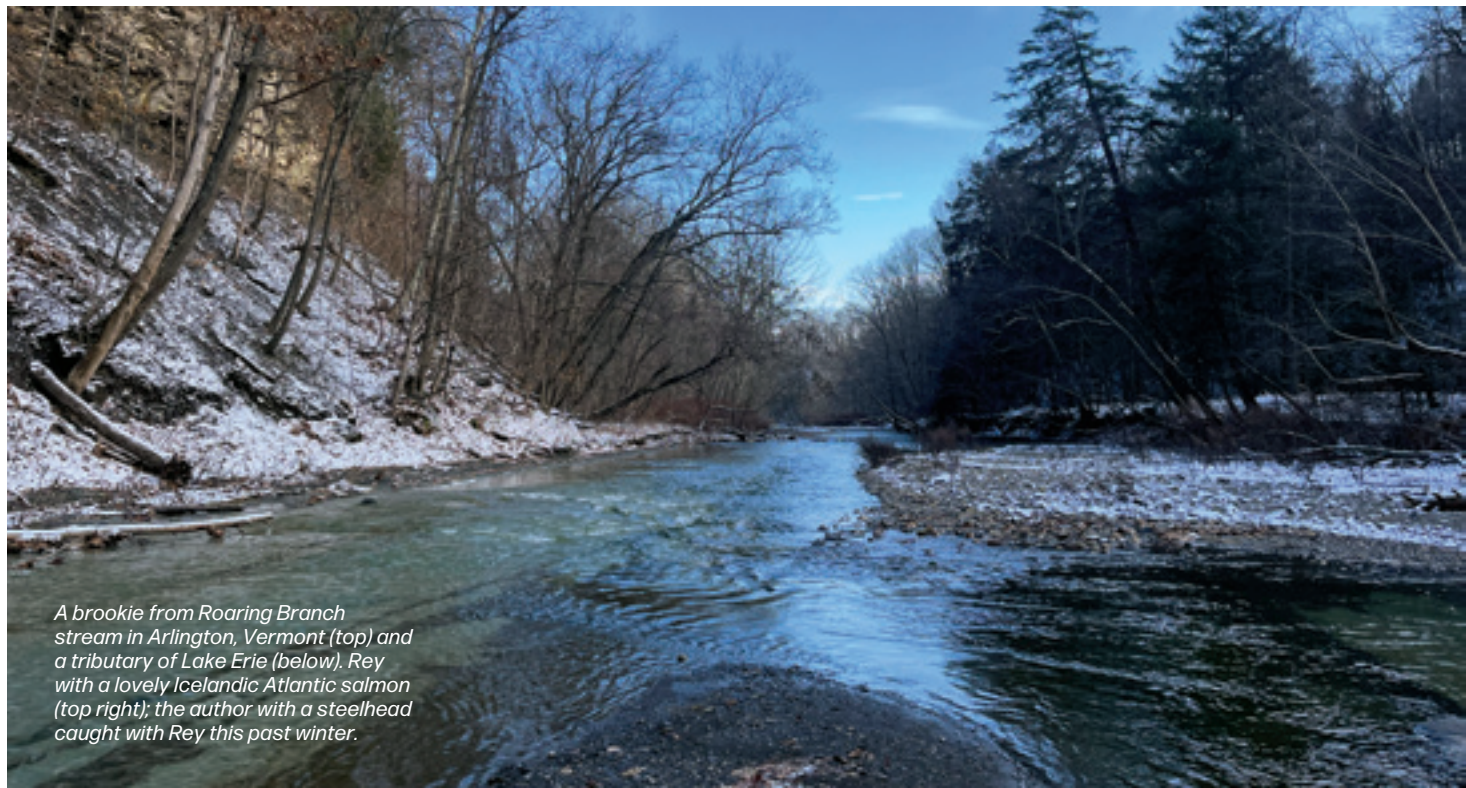
When two other anglers appear, we move downstream, where we are again alone. He strives to put his clients on sections of the river where there are no other people. "The older I get, the more solitude I need, and I share that with my clients," says Rey, who became a successful artist despite his early doubts. "We do everything super slow, so you can appreciate the experience. There is really no reason to go fast. If you do, you'll miss the whole point of being out there."

Rey later echoes a truism that anyone contemplating the guide life should first ponder. "There is a difference between being a good fisherman and being a good guide," says Rey, who has been guiding for about 25 years. "You can be a good fisherman and a terrible guide. It's more than putting people on fish. It's providing something people don't have in their everyday life."

The guide award from the 168-year-old Vermont fly-fishing



Alberto Rey guides only on those streams with which he is intimately familiar (left). The artist and fly fisherman captures Bourn Brook, a tributary of the Battenkill in Vermont (top). Tools of the trade for the life of an artist.



and outdoor firm is based primarily on client recommendations. “This is their day,” Rey says. “My job is to make it the best day for them that I can.” Having spent 32 years as a college professor, Rey is well-schooled in the art of instructing and the different ways people learn, be it a student in a classroom or a client trying to get the hang of fly-fishing.

Like many others, Rey has gone through the usual stages of angling — catching the most fish, the largest fish and so on. It’s no surprise that as he matured as an angler, those early yardsticks meant less and less. “At a certain point, catching fish doesn’t matter that much,” he says.

When scouting a river he knows well, he often carries just a few streamers, or no tackle at all. He only uses his eyes. He doesn’t want to be tempted to fish. “I don’t mean to sound hokey, but you feel like these rivers have spirits,” says Rey, who understands well the language of moving water. “Every stream has its own personality. It’s like an old friend welcoming you back.”

This comfort level is most pronounced on waters he knows well. And that deep familiarity takes time to attain. “It only occurs after everything else washes away,” he says. “You’re just opened to everything around you. And that happens in places you’ve come to know well.”

On new water, too many unfamiliar details prevent the same sense of comfort. “I don’t guide any place I’m not intimately familiar with,” he says. “On some streams, I still feel like a newbie. Even though I have fished them 30 times, I feel like a stranger. I haven’t been welcomed in yet.”

In a larger sense, that feeling of being a stranger is not unfamiliar to

Rey, who has wrestled with assimilating into a culture into which he was not born. His art, teaching and guiding has helped him tighten the loop and feel at home. “My art, for a long time, was about trying to figure out who I was and how do I fit in,” Rey says.

We talked about Winslow Homer’s paintings, particularly the ones featuring Adirondack guides leading their aspirants into the wilds. New York’s wilderness has changed much since Homer’s days. “But for someone working in his office, the act of being out in nature and opening up in a way a guide can make happen is not available to most people,” Rey says. “I’d be honored to be part of that tradition, to make the wilderness a regular part of people’s lives.”

Rey takes a minimalist approach to fly-fishing, removing as many distractions as possible. He keeps his rigs simple without jeopardizing their effectiveness. He doesn’t change flies often, and he uses the least amount of split shot possible. He makes his egg patterns with a tungsten bead inside to reduce split shot on the leader. He won’t fish beads. “I strive for trying to fish with the simplest rigs and purest approach to fly-fishing as possible,” Rey says. “It allows me to enjoy the pieces of fishing more.”



The artist working on his "Aesthetics of Death Series" in his studio, and on one of his favorite streams.

Rey enjoys guiding because it forces him to be closely attuned to stream life. "Being connected like that, I feel it's all linked together — the art, the guiding, fly-fishing," the artist says. "You really have an idea of how things look."

Rey married Janeil Strong the same year he moved to Dunkirk to begin teaching. Last summer, Dr. Janeil Rey was promoted to Dean, College of Education, Health Sciences and Human Services at SUNY Fredonia. The couple have two children — a daughter who is an actor, and a son who recently graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont.

Rey gives credit to his wife for shouldering some of his family responsibilities, allowing him more time on streams and in the studio. "It is not something that I am proud of," he says, "but it was the reality of the situation then and, in some ways, now." Rey guides the fall and spring steelhead runs, from late October through June, weather depending. He also guides for spring smallmouth on the same waters.

Winding Road

Rey has traveled a long, shifting road to reach this point in his life. Without the generational connections that the native-born take for granted, he has sometimes felt uncoupled to his birthplace and his adopted homeland. "I've been on a long quest," Rey says. "For the majority of my life, it has been, who am I?"

Alberto Rey was born in Havana in 1960, where his father Enrique

was an avowed Fidel Castro critic. When Castro rose to power, his father escaped to Mexico, where he was granted political asylum. When Alberto was 3, he, his sister and his mother were able to join him in Mexico. The family moved to Miami in 1965.

His father, who held a doctorate in mathematics and a master's in Spanish, worked in Miami in a sugar refinery and for a fiberglass boatbuilder, among other jobs. His mother, Olga Guerra Rey, also worked various jobs. She wrapped guides on fishing rods, served as an Avon salesperson and more.

After a couple of years in Miami, his father moved the family to Barnesboro, Pennsylvania, a small, blue-collar coal-mining town, where Enrique returned to education, teaching Spanish at the local high school attended by Rey and his sister. "We lived in the middle of nowhere," says Rey, who doesn't recall any other Spanish speakers living there. The significance of Rey's childhood in Barnesboro wasn't evident to him until he viewed it from a distance. "It was really important. There was nature all around me." He hiked, camped, dabbled in fishing, hunted rabbit and pheasant, and played football.

And through the osmosis of boyhood, he came to embody the strong work ethic of his parents and the small working-class town. "We never had much money," Rey says. "We sent money back to Cuba for our relatives."

Rey also had a long interest in drawing. As a child, he copied album covers and illustrations from *Mad* magazine. In high school, he did the



same with paintings from art books. He was recruited to West Point on a football scholarship, but a knee injury before the season started prevented him from playing. He spent one year there and could have remained — the military academy was willing to continue his scholarship — but it wasn't the right fit.

Rey transferred to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he again played football, until he broke his arm. Rey remembers being career-oriented. He had always thought he'd major in the sciences and embark on a well-trodden path to success and job security. "Because I grew up in a coal-mining town, I never thought of art as a career," he says. "When I got older — much older — I saw that you could do it all."

Wind Shift

Early loves sometimes die hard. After taking a drawing class at IUP, Rey asked the professor whether he thought he had what it takes to make it as an artist. The professor was encouraging and offered Rey a position as his teaching assistant for the next semester. Rey switched his major from biology to art, a move that caused a temporary fissure between father and son; they didn't speak to each other for two years.

While going to IUP, where he earned a bachelor's degree, he also attended the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. After graduating, he worked on Christo's *Surrounded Islands* project in Miami and other jobs. In 1987, he earned his master's degree in drawing and painting from the University at Buffalo. IUP honored Rey with a distinguished alumni award in 2008.

Rey possesses a burly determination that has served him well on the grid iron and in the pursuit of his goals. During one of our conversations, he quoted artist Chuck Close: "Inspiration is for amateurs." The remainder of the Close quote fits Rey's makeup to a T: "The rest of us just show up and get to work. If you wait around for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike you in the brain, you are not going to make an awful lot of work."

Rey has enjoyed a successful career as a teacher, artist and guide. And he has created an abundance of art in the process. His paintings are in more than 20 museum collections and have appeared in nearly 200 exhibitions. He has written and illustrated three books and contributed to several others. "Being successful as an artist is very difficult," Rey says. "No one ever taught me the business of being an artist." Among his many accomplishments, Rey started the educational program Children in the Stream/4H in 1998 — a youth fly-fishing program that he still directs.

Rey fooled around with fishing in Barnesboro, but it wasn't his or his friends' focus. He didn't touch a fishing rod in college. It wasn't until he moved to Dunkirk and established his career that he became interested in fly-fishing. He'd heard about the local steelhead and spent a winter researching tackle. He ordered his first fly rod from a Cabela's catalog. Ever resourceful, Rey glued AstroTurf to the bottom of his waders for traction. A large, ornate, gold-and-silver belt buckle from Orvis commemorating his recognition as an exemplary guide is just one example of how far the angler and artist has come.

Rey and his wife are currently on a six-month around-the-world journey. "Fishing is not the main reason for the trip," says Rey, who is nevertheless taking two six-piece rods — a 6- and an 8-weight — and one box of flies. He's also carrying art supplies. The couple are otherwise traveling light. One carry-on and one backpack each.

Looking back, I feel fortunate to have witnessed Rey in silent conversation with a sublime tributary and old friend as winter came on. The two of us talked as I fished, but I know Rey was listening to water running over stones and slate and seeing far more than I could. He was home; I was the outsider. "For me, life is just like a stream," he says. "It pulls you in different directions, but they all lead back to the same stream." 🐟