



**no existe un mundo poshuracán:
Puerto Rican Art in the Wake
of Hurricane Maria**

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, USA

Having grown up in Puerto Rico during the 1980s, I can now say that, looking back, those were years of relative prosperity. The island, an unincorporated territory (i.e. colony) of the US, was then a military buffer against communist Cuba and, by extension, the USSR, defending the Antilles and, particularly, the Panama Canal against Soviet incursions. It was not uncommon to see tanks and other military vehicles on the motorways; in large part, that's why the US had subsidized building those roads at all.

When the USSR collapsed in 1991, the island experienced massive disinvestment as its strategic importance rapidly dwindled. By the early 2000s, my relatives in the San Juan area were suffering routine water shortages and electricity brownouts. The island has long been locked in a patronizing relationship with US imperialism, from its days of foreign-owned, sugar-cane plantations to the present. Although Puerto Ricans are US citizens by statute, they are barred from voting in national elections and do not pay federal taxes. To fill the deficit of reduced US spending on the island, a series of neoliberal, pro-business local politicians borrowed heavily to fund private enterprises, spurring a decades-long debt crisis that came to a head after the catastrophic, category-four Hurricane Maria hit Puerto

Rico in 2017. Politicians, particularly those in favour of US statehood for the island, cozied up to Anglo capitalists, deregulating and privatizing resources to auction them off to absentee corporations. Bad storms (and earthquakes) had impacted the island in the past but, by 2017, little government support or infrastructure remained. Puerto Rico currently faces a mass exodus: in the coming decades, there may be fewer Puerto Ricans living on the island than non-Puerto Ricans, the latter of whom are happily snapping up real estate on the so-called Isla del Encanto (Enchanted Isle).

To mark the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria, the Whitney has gathered together recent works by 20 Puerto Rican artists that grapple with how to

give form to the overwhelming scope of these problems. Masterfully organized by Whitney curator Marcela Guerrero, with Angelica Arbelaez and Sofia Silva, the show is the first survey of Puerto Rican art in a major US institution in half a century, joining the seminal but now distant 1969 exhibition 'Contemporary Puerto Rican Artists' at the Brooklyn Museum, and the pair of 1973 shows co-produced by the Metropolitan Museum and El Museo del Barrio.

The works on view mourn the impoverishment of local institutions – schools, universities, hospitals – yet they also lend tacit or active support to the new grass-roots organizations that are creating parallel infrastructures of self-governance. Miguel Luciano's *Shields / Escudos* (2020), a sculpture of ten protest shields on stanchions, is perhaps the show's emblematic work. Made from decommissioned school buses, the shields bear the names of the closed schools on their yellow exteriors, while the interiors are lined with the black and white version of the Puerto Rican flag that has become the symbol of the anti-colonialist movement in recent years. In the same gallery, dozens of Garvin Sierra Vega's galvanizing political posters, produced under the aegis of his Taller Gráfico PR (Print Shop PR) business and Instagram project, provide a stunning overview of the struggles being waged to maintain a basic standard of living on the island: access to reliable electricity, education and clean water foremost among them.

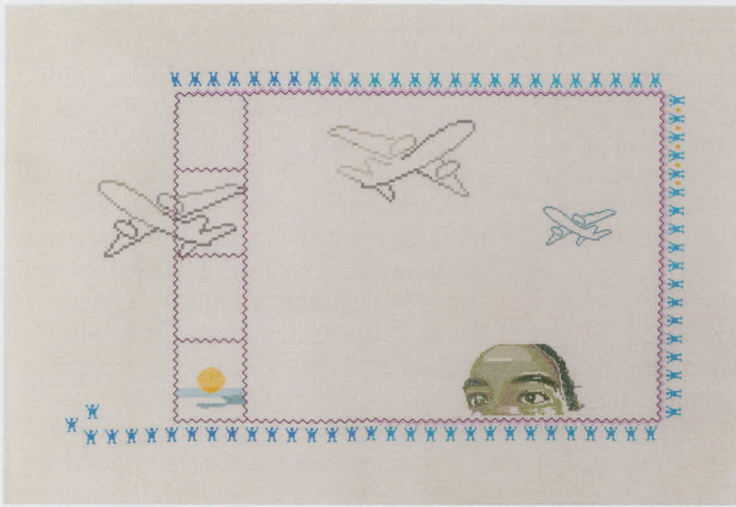
Sofia Gallisá Muriente's seven-minute film *B-Roll* (2017) demonstrates how unevenly hardships are experienced on the island. Former pro-statehood Puerto Rico governor Ricardo Roselló – who was run out of office in 2019 after massive protests against his callousness and corruption – had tweeted in 2018 that the island is a 'blank canvas for innovation'. So what, then, of the Puerto Ricans ostensibly erased from that canvas? Muriente's work,



Puerto Rico is the blessed earth

Top
Rogelio Báez
Vega, *Paraiso Móvil*
(Mobile Paradise),
2019, oil on canvas,
1.4 x 1.8 m

Bottom
Sofía Córdoba,
*dawn_chorus ii: el
niagara en bicicleta*,
2018, film still



Top
Lulu Varona, *Ir y venir* (Come and Go), 2021, cotton thread embroidered on Aida cloth, 64 × 94 cm

Bottom
Gamaliel Rodríguez, *Collapsed Soul*, 2020–21, ink and acrylic on canvas, 2.1 × 2.8 m

appropriating corporate and touristic agencies' video pitches for private investment on the island, recounts, through the participants' rapacious and gleeful greed, the depressing story of how profit has been systematically organized to flow into the coffers of US speculators and corporations. Sofía Córdova's 105-minute filmic tour de force, *dawn_chorus ii: el niagara en bicicleta* (2018), is narrated by the artist's family, and in particular her aunt and uncle, who left the island after Hurricane Maria, traumatized by the constant precarity of their existence. Using video her aunt shot of the hurricane's landfall and the subsequent flooding, Córdova intercuts her own footage of the island's slow recovery. One of the work's subtle but implicit effects is how it attests to Puerto Rico's depopulation. The messy, loud, dangerous, lively San Juan of my youth is at times a near ghost town. In a moving scene that concludes the film, Córdova's parents are shown shoulder high in a pool, their faces adorned with red paint. Rafael brandishes a conch shell, and Alma a Spanish fan; together they perform a series of slow, ritualistic movements accompanied by the Ghetto Brothers' haunting 1971 psychedelic Latin-rock tune 'Viva Puerto Rico Libre' (Long Live Free Puerto Rico).

The issue of Puerto Rican sovereignty is complicated by the persecution of generations of pro-independence nationalist leaders since the early days of the 20th century. After the Cuban Revolution, the US was even quicker to suppress collectivist sentiments on its colony, and resources came to the island in part to stave off anti-gringo/anti-capitalist activism. The creation of a tourism economy for and by foreigners converted Puerto Ricans into low-paid service workers, thematized in both the Whitney show and the excellent

companion exhibition 'Tropical Is Political: Caribbean Art Under the Visitor Economy Regime', recently at New York's Americas Society and currently at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico in San Juan. When communism fell, the justifications for remaining a US colonial 'commonwealth' became obscure. However, in a 2012 national referendum, only 5.5 percent of island residents supported a free Puerto Rico. The problem of Puerto Rican independence is thus two-pronged: political disenfranchisement coupled with economic disempowerment. Several works in the Whitney show tackle the issues surrounding the island's land and asset transfer to Anglo Americans. In paintings such as *Paraíso Móvil* (Mobile Paradise, 2019), Rogelio Báez Vega depicts scenes of architectural decay – once-stately buildings becoming ruins, primed for

the cycle of disinvestment to hit rock bottom so that the predatory practices of new owners can be nominated by international markets as savvy business. Gamaliel Rodríguez's canvases present, in sci-fi fashion, the dereliction of essential architectures: in his case, various views of the airport's radio-control tower being overcome by vegetation (*Figure 1832 PSE*, 2018).

Poignant is a word much overused. Yet, given its etymological root in the Latin *pugno* ('punching' or 'pricking'), I can think of no better description for Lulu Varona's *Ir y venir* (Come and Go, 2021) – a spare, cross-stitched work depicting three airplanes, a fragment of a child's brown face and a small landscape of the sun setting over the ocean. Ringed by a pattern of dozens of tiny figures with arms upraised, the work captures the century-old diasporic plight of Puerto Ricans. The US-sponsored Operation Bootstrap of the 1940s and '50s mandated that one third of Puerto Rico's population emigrate to the US to reduce poverty on the island. Every Boricua in exile misses *la Isla*. Yet most, and even those who remain on the island, suffer from economic barriers that have made the historic *jíbaro/a* existence – the poor but self-sufficient country life that my grandparents were jostled out of in their youths – a somewhat indistinct cultural memory. Although the diaspora documented in the Whitney show is more recent, Puerto Rican artists continue to unpack these complicated burdens of displacement.

— Eva Díaz

