

HYPERALLERGIC

What Does a Post-Hurricane World Look Like?

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An exhibition of contemporary work by Puerto Rican artists at the Whitney captures the impossibility of going back and the difficulty of forging ahead.

Long before Hurricane Joaquín began to brew, its warm vapors hovering menacingly along the Atlantic in a slow, furtive murmur, SS El Faro was doomed. In October 2015, the cargo vessel carrying food, medicine, and other critical supplies was caught in the swells of Joaquín on its journey from Florida to San Juan; subsequent investigations uncovered troubling safety violations, including outdated lifeboats, that contributed to the deaths of the ship's entire crew of 33. "Collapsed Soul" (2020–21) by Gamaliel Rodríguez, part of an exhibition of works by contemporary Puerto Rican artists at the Whitney Museum of American Art, portrays the ship's

ghostly hull evanescing in a pall of metallic blues in the middle of the ocean.

No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria, organized by curator Marcela Guerrero with Angelica Arbelaez and Sofia Silva, opened last fall to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the Category 4 storm that made landfall on September 20, 2017, killing thousands in its path and over the long and heavy months of its aftermath. The exhibition is not what unsuspecting visitors might expect to find in a museum ostensibly dedicated to American artistic grandeur — not just because the institution’s track record of exhibiting Latinx artists has been historically paltry, but because the show constitutes an exposé of American failure. The works on view denounce the local and federal incompetencies that enabled Maria to be as devastating as it was — like the unfortunately dubbed PROMESA law, the US government’s disastrous effort to restructure Puerto Rico’s debt through crushing austerity measures — and celebrate the victories made possible by the island’s collective rebellion against injustice, such as the historic demonstrations known as Verano del ’19. Drawn from a verse by poet Raquel Salas Rivera, the exhibition’s title could be translated as either “a post-hurricane world doesn’t exist” or “there isn’t a world post-hurricane”; encompassed in this tension is both the impossibility of going back and the difficulty of forging ahead.

Installation view of *no existe un mundo poshuracán* with Sofia Córdova’s video work *dawn_chorus ii: el niágara en bicicleta* (*dawn_chorus ii: crossing the niagara on a bicycle*) (2018) at center; Candida Alvarez, “Jellow (Yellow)” (2018) (left) and Armig Santos’s “Yellow Flowers” (2022) and “Procesión en Vieques III (Procession in Vieques III)” (2022) (right) (photo by Ron Amstutz; courtesy the Whitney)

Viewers are greeted by Sofia Córdova’s *dawn_chorus ii: el niágara en bicicleta* (2018), a nearly two-hour-long video that stitches together family members’ shaky cell phone footage and narrations of the storm’s landfall with panoramic views of the island and snippets of life after the hurricane, like people exercising amid overgrown bushes. In one scene, Córdova’s cousin Miguel is in the kitchen discussing the notorious October 2017 clip of former president Donald Trump launching rolls of paper towels at a crowd in an emergency distribution center, an incident that dominated global headlines and spurred weeks of collective cringing. “No one investigated who the hell he was throwing paper towels to,” Miguel says in Spanish, suspicious

of the freshly laundered shirts worn by the men in the group. “I’ll tell you who had a washer on and was able to wash a white shirt, when everyone here was covered in dirt up to their eyes!” Not the poor, he posits, but local politicians and their lackeys; Trump’s viral photo-op was an orchestrated distraction from Maria’s tangible horrors and from racial upheaval at home.

Córdova’s strength lies in her ability to complicate canned portrayals of natural disaster, challenging overused visual narratives of blue tarps and pitifully swaying palm trees. Similarly, a sculpture by Edra Soto invites us to reconsider how we look at images of destruction. As part of her ongoing project *Graft* (2022–), the artist recreates Puerto Rican *quiebrasoles* — literally “break the sun” — latticed concrete screens that are ubiquitous features of vernacular architecture on the island. Peek through tiny viewfinders embedded throughout and you’ll find photos capturing life after Hurricanes Irma and Maria. This intimate way of seeing them makes room for pause and reflection.

The exhibition is loosely organized into four sections centered on physical infrastructure, political protest, grief and loss, and the environment. As in the real world, though, no formal boundaries separate them; rather, they bleed into each other in a dizzy, inescapable continuum. Yiyo Tirado Rivera’s “La Concha” (2022), from his series of sandcastles of iconic modernist hotels, recreates a tropicalia relic. The sculpture is meant to gradually collapse into a pile of sand during the run of the show, invoking the hazards of coastal erosion as well as the tenuous mirage of the Caribbean’s tourism sector. Gabriella N. Báez’s “Ojalá nos encontremos en el mar” (“Hopefully We’ll Meet at Sea”) (2018–), a stirring installation of threaded photographs connecting the artist and her father, who died by suicide in 2018, is a gesture of remembrance as well as an act of resistance against a state that left vulnerable individuals to fend for themselves in the wake of the storm.

The artists in this show decry the myth of US saviorism that the hurricane blew wide open. Gabriella Torres-Ferrer’s sculpture “Valora tu mentira americana” (“Value Your American Lie”) (2018), a fallen lamppost culled from the debris of Hurricane Maria and suspended diagonally from the ceiling, bears a small plastic sign imploring Puerto Ricans to “value [their] American citizenship” and vote for statehood, not independence, ahead of a June 2017 referendum. The object is a legible index of the power grid Maria knocked out, draping the archipelago in

darkness — as outages continue to this day.

Neither a US state nor entirely self-governing, Puerto Rico remains an “unincorporated territory,” a cruel turn of phrase that brings to mind unmoored, floating land masses. It is both “owned by the United States” and “foreign to the United States,” in the exact words of the **1901 Supreme Court ruling** on the island’s territorial status. In this strange limbo, Puerto Ricans can be drafted into the military but can’t vote for a US president; wealthy Americans arrive in throngs to reap the benefits of a looser tax policy, but amid widespread poverty, Puerto Ricans cannot fall back on forms of federal assistance reserved for those in the 50 states. The same provision that allowed American subsidiaries to operate tax-free for years, Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code, **devastated Puerto Rico** when its dissolution in 1996 left a lacuna in the island’s manufacturing sector that was quickly filled up with debt. In works such as Brooklyn native Danielle De Jesus’s layered painting “Google the Ponce Massacre” (2021), which bridges historical and contemporary activism, we are reminded that Puerto Rico’s past is very much in the present, and that its current strifes cannot be separated from its colonial condition.

A bill that aims to resolve Puerto Rico’s status was reintroduced in the House this month, calling for the first-ever binding referendum in which the island’s current status as a US commonwealth is not an option, but it faces a bleak future in the Republican-majority Senate. Against this backdrop, many Puerto Ricans choose to leave; several artists in this exhibition, in fact, live in the diaspora. Frances Gallardo’s *Aerosoles (Aerosols)* series (2022), drawings based on nanoscopic images of Saharan dust samples from sandstorms that travel across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, resemble asteroids charging across a grid evoking a weather map. The work reflects on our changing climate: As warming temperatures give way to raging winds, the island becomes coated in a hazy coat of dust, triggering air quality advisories. In a more abstract sense, Gallardo is also illustrating patterns of transposition and displacement.

Depending on where you start, the exhibition either ends or begins on a note of uprising. The months and years after Maria brought renewed waves of activism to the island, the pinnacle of which was arguably the 2019 ouster of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. The politician’s self-dealings and **hateful diatribes** embodied everything many Puerto Ricans were ready to leave behind: widespread corruption, anti-Black sentiment, homophobia, and the marginalization of victims

hardest hit by the storm. Designer Garvin Sierra Vega chronicled the emergence of dissident messages during this period on his popular Instagram account @tallergraficopr. A series of 38 printed posters take up a wall at the Whitney, including one depicting a silhouette of the news anchor who uttered the emblematic words “*El perreo intenso acaba de comenzar*” — “The intense *perreo* has just begun” — when LGBTQ+ activists danced in protest outside the San Juan Cathedral near the governor’s home.

I met Gamaliel Rodríguez, the artist who painted the 2015 sinking of SS El Faro, during an opening event for the exhibition. I asked him why, in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, he felt compelled to depict the wreck of a cargo ship that occurred two years prior. He told me he saw the catastrophe and its likely preventable losses as analogous to the needless suffering Maria brought on the people. “We have no sustainability,” Rodríguez said. “For a sailor, a ship is his island, his life. But Puerto Rico is a ship adrift in the Caribbean.”

His piece, like some of the best in this show, is not so much about a storm as it is about the hard truths Maria washed up on the shore. Depictions of ruin and despondency, necessary in order to truly face the scope of the disaster, are not entirely absent from the exhibition, nor does it present a cloyingly sentimental picture of hope. But *No existe un mundo poshuracán* resists extremes and invites us into a soft-edged space where the days blend together into a single time span and quotidian injustices wear us down gradually, and long passages of apparent stillness are suddenly roiled by spikes of anger or bliss. This hazy, uncertain, inconsistent reality is a much more accurate and human portrayal of the post-Maria world.

No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art In The Wake Of Hurricane Maria continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through April 23. The exhibition was curated by Marcela Guerrero with Angelica Arbelaez and Sofía Silva.