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Critic's Pick: Puerto Ricans Expand the Scope of 'American Art' at the Whitney
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A still from Sofía Córdova's "dawn_chorus ii: crossing the niagara on a bicycle" (2018), with the camera following a group of horses through the forest. Credit...

Sofía Córdova; via Kate Werble Gallery

On the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Maria, a show of extraordinary tenderness and political bite shines a light on a man-made and natural disaster.

For many North Americans, the lasting news image of Hurricane Maria, the monster storm that laid waste to Puerto Rico in 2017, wasn't of the storm itself, but of a political photo-op that followed, when former President Donald J. Trump visited more than two weeks after the disaster had left the island desperately short on power, fresh water and food.

Trump was escorted to an emergency distribution center where, in a kind of cartoon version of imperial largess, he began lobbing rolls of paper towels into a crowd. The gesture read to some as a rebuke: "Clean up your mess." (Trump had earlier confided to Twitter that Puerto Ricans "want everything to be done for them.") Turning his back on the mild scramble that ensued, he purred to reporters: "There's a lot of love in this room, a lot of love."

There actually *is* a lot of love in the exhibition titled "No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan. There's also a tremendous amount of anger and sorrow, along with much beauty, in a carefully textured and moving show that is also among the first major surveys of

contemporary Puerto Rican art in a leading United States museum in nearly 50 years.

(The last one I can recall was "The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico: Pre-Columbian to Present" in 1974, a collaboration between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and New York's small, budget-challenged El Museo del Barrio, which has been consistently showing work by Puerto Rican artists living on and off the island since it opened in East Harlem in 1969.)

Organized by Marcela Guerrero, a Whitney associate curator, along with Angelica Arbelaez and Sofia Silva, present and past museum fellows, the exhibition takes its Spanish-language title from a line in a poem by the Puerto Rican writer Raquel Salas Rivera, which Guerrero translates twice, as "A post-hurricane world doesn't exist" and as "there isn't a world post-hurricane." In her syntactically slippery second rendering, two ideas interlink.

One is that the social and economic hardships experienced by residents on the island not only continue today, five years after Maria, but have always, in some form, been there as a product of longstanding colonialist exploitation. (Designated an "unincorporated territory" by Washington, Puerto Rico exercises self-governance but is effectively a U.S. colony).

The second and more abstract idea is that the Puerto Rican realities, present and past, thrown into relief by Maria are also the realities of oppressed countries and cultures across the globe. And that those realities demand the creation of a new world that still is only being imagined.

The show itself, with 50 works by 20 artists, most of whom will be new to visitors, takes us straight into a very specific world, the one created by Maria's arrival in Puerto Rico on Sept. 20, 2017, as recorded in a feature length documentary-style video by Sofía Córdova. Projected on a large screen at the exhibition entrance, the film starts with a flickery cellphone video taken by the artist's aunt Maggie in her home a few hours after the storm hit and the island's already tentative power grid had failed.

By the phone's light we see rain leaking in through closed windows and under doors, and we hear her aunt's reassuring accounts of how various household pets are faring. The view of crisis broadens as the film moves, in daylight, outdoors to shots of flood water surging through city streets, and to interviews with residents trying to come to grips, materially and emotionally, with the chaos.

Interjected into the documentary flow are images of symbolic, even poetic responses to crisis. A cloud-strewn aerial view of the island is accompanied by a vintage pop song extolling Puerto Rico as "the pearl from the Caribbean." In an extended sequence, we see a woman, possibly housebound by the storm, performing a strenuous calisthenic dance on the balcony of her home. And in a series of clips repeated throughout the film, another woman, mysteriously masked, guides us, like a cautionary spirit, through half-ruined tropical forests.

Several themes the film sets up, political and personal, are elaborated on in work by the show's other artists. Some give us history, and the sense that the past and present are, for better and worse, continuous.

In a painting called "Collapsed Souls" by Gamaliel Rodríguez, the image of an exploding ship, done in bruised blues and blacks, recalls the battleship Maine, whose destruction in Cuba in 1898 sparked the Spanish-American War, which led to the United States claiming Puerto Rico

as its own. But the painting was directly inspired by the 2015 sinking, in a hurricane, of an antiquated U.S. cargo vessel on its way from Florida to San Juan with food, building materials and medical supplies — North American imports on which the island remains cripplingly dependent as a result of punishingly restrictive U.S. shipping laws.

Several works focus on the century-long development of Puerto Rico as a speculative real estate investment by both carpetbagging outsiders and an opportunistic home government. Yiyo Tirado Rivera's sandcastle-style model of the 1950s "tropical modernist" San Juan hotel, "La Concha," an early emblem of leisure-industry profiteering, suggests how shallow the investment is: The sculpture is designed to slowly disintegrate during the run of the show.

And Sofía Gallisá Muriente's video "B-Roll" is an acid-dipped culling of outtakes from promotional films produced by the Puerto Rican government, selling "paradise" to the highest bidders, with profits landing in just a few well-oiled hands. (She also has a work in a small, smart, show called "Tropical is Political: Caribbean Art Under the Visitor Economy Regime" at Americas Society, through Dec. 17.)

Politically minded to the core, the Whitney show is also a thing of serious tenderness, and of many individual beauties, among them Candida Alvarez's double-sided mountain landscapes; Edra Soto's sculptural garden wall embedded with viewfinder photos of storm-altered island life; and painted salutes — part public mural, part prayer card — to secular martyrs of the near and distant past by Armig Santos, based in San Juan, and Danielle de Jesus, based in Queens.

Gallisá Muriente comes through again, powerfully, with a 2020 video titled "Celaje (Cloudscape)," a homage to deceased family members and to a homeland under threat from climate change. But no work is more stirring than Gabriella N. Báez's "Ojalá nos encontremos en el mar (Hopefully, we'll meet at sea)," a pair of tabletop installations dedicated to her father, who died a suicide some months after Maria.

One reliquary grouping assembles a few of his portable possessions: his camera, some music tapes. The other is made up of family snapshots, mostly of him and his daughter. Báez has enlarged several pictures and in each connected the eyes, mouths and hands of father and child with sewn lengths of red thread.

Image

Begun in 2018, this meditative piece — like, I would guess, the artist's searching relationship to her father — is an open-ended project, a quest indefinitely in progress. So, of course, is Puerto Rican history, as evidenced in the strong work that has come directly out of recent civic unrest and environmental upheaval.

Popular demonstrations in 2019 — "Verano del 19" — contributed to the ouster of Gov. Ricardo Rosselló, who was criticized for his response to Hurricane Maria; for promoting untrammled gentrification; for disparaging (in leaked text messages) L.G.B.T. people, Blacks, and storm victims; and, on a pretext of fiscal prudence, for closing public schools and failing to reopen those shuttered by Maria.

Protesters hit the streets and artists, some represented in the show, responded. Miguel Luciano created a usable arsenal of combat shields using metal cut from scrapped school buses. The

graphic artist Garvin Sierra Vega designed a series of topical posters and distributed them via social media — @tallergraficopr on Instagram (printed copies of 39 designs fill a wall in the show). It took involvement in the protest beyond the island itself.

Printed copies of posters fill a wall in the show. And in them, two motifs recur. One is a stark black-and-white rendition of the red-white-and-blue Puerto Rican flag, a chromatic version of a power outage that turns an emblem of underprivileged citizenship — Puerto Ricans are technically U.S. citizens but can't vote in federal elections — into a memorial.

The other is the numeral 4,645, the much-disputed estimate of the death toll from the hurricane.

But about one reality there's little question: Maria was and remains a touchstone, and possibly turning point, in modern Puerto Rican history, both for the damage it caused and for the cultural self-awareness and self-assertion it seems to have raised.

Or so the exhibition implies. It begins, in the Córdova video, with a single cellphone light flickering in the dark and a single voice describing a tempest breaking. And it ends in another video, this one by Elle Pérez and titled "Wednesday, Friday," on another night of grid-failure darkness, this one post-Maria. Filmed outdoors and illuminated by what seem to be fusillades of light — car headlights seen through pouring rain — it catches a traditional street fiesta in progress. The celebration feels like a riotous love-fest and suggests the existence of a political energy source that's more than resilient. It's charged up and irrepressible.

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

Nov. 23 through April 23, Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, (212) 570-3600; whitney.org.