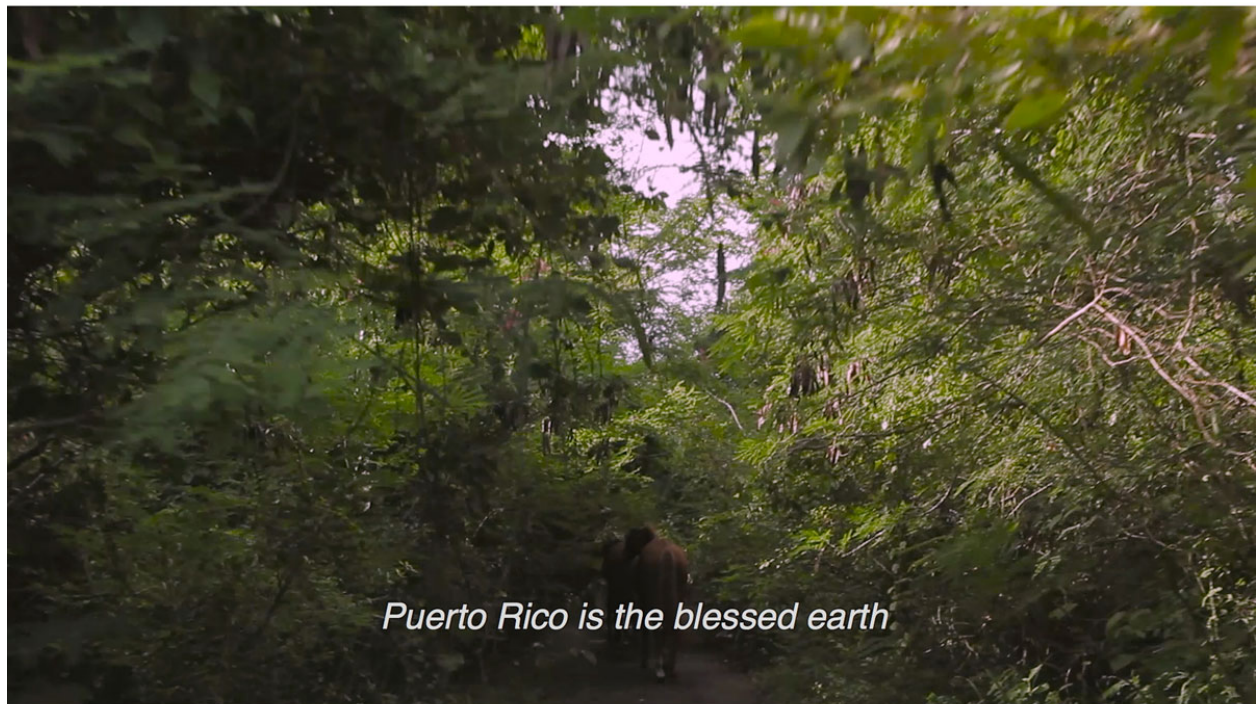


ARTnews

An Ambitious Whitney Exhibition Charts Puerto Rican Artists' Resilience Following Hurricane Maria

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Sofía Córdova, *dawn_chorus ii: el niagara en bicicleta* (still), 2018. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KATE WERBLE GALLERY, NEW YORK

To add the prefix [post-](#) to a word typically implies a clear, resolute ending to something that has already occurred. Yet when something like it appears in the title of the [Whitney Museum](#)'s landmark exhibition "no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria," which closes Sunday, it refers to an event that is unfinished and still unfolding.

The exhibition takes its title from a line in the Raquel Salas Rivera's poetry collection, [While They Sleep: Under the Bed Is Another Country](#) (2019), which consists of short, fragmented poems that begin in English and end in Spanish via corresponding footnotes:

the airlines offer tickets for \$50
if you wanted to leave home
forever²⁰

²⁰*no existe un mundo poshuracán*



Three "Air Paintings" (all 2018) by Candida Alvarez, installation view. PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

Curator [Marcela Guerrero](#) read the collection as she was planning the exhibition, as it expressed the framework that she was already conceptualizing for her show. The poem soon became the show's guiding light—a "conceptual palimpsest," as Guerrero put it. She invited Salas Rivera to participate in the exhibition's planning, which ultimately resulted in a catalogue essay and public program, and the poem is republished on the catalogue's first page.

"[The title] signifies to me this idea of being perpetually caught in the wake," Guerrero told [ARTnews](#). "There isn't another world—this is it. Obviously, hurricanes have a beginning and an end, but it's this aftermath that is keeping people down. In the most direct way, it's this idea of not being afforded the luxury to think beyond the disaster of the hurricane."

A short reflection from anthropology professor Yarimar Bonilla, also published in the catalogue, puts it succinctly: "The reckoning did not begin with Maria, but Maria gave it a name."

"No existe un mundo poshuracán" doesn't cleanly translate into English. It can either mean "A post-hurricane world doesn't exist" or "There isn't a world post-hurricane." But either version loses the nuance of syntax of the Spanish language that Salas Rivera felt best conveyed his intention.

"The way I wouldn't want it to be read is that I'm saying that we can never move past Maria," Salas Rivera said in an interview. "The ways in which I hope it would be read—and how most people have felt it—is that it does feel like there's a before and after Maria in some senses." He's quick to clarify that Hurricane Maria revealed "the worst and most evident aspects of the colonial relationship" between [Puerto Rico](#) and the US, and is merely "a continuation of colonial policies" that have impacted the island, often called the world's oldest colony, for over 500 years.

He added, "We're living in the wake of Maria even if it's stopped being in the news. We come back to it as a place of this unresolved grief and pain."

Spanning the museum's entire sixth floor, Guerrero's exhibition brings together a mixture of artworks in a variety of mediums that all reflect the state of artistic production that is



happening at the moment in Puerto Rico, New York, Chicago, Oakland, and elsewhere. Here you will find conceptual, formal, and poetic strategies for filtering the multitude of emotions that Maria elicited, as well as reflections on the confluence of important events that predate Maria, like austerity measures imposed by the debt-restructuring PROMESA act from 2016 and the passing of Laws 20 and 22 that aim to attract non-Puerto

Rican investors to the island in 2012, or ones that follow Maria, like mourning the dead and a promised recovery that has never quite come.

Guerrero said it was necessary that an exhibition such as this was “invested in complicating these histories,” which the hurricane had laid bare and exposed—especially at an institution whose full name is technically the Whitney Museum of American Art.

“So why not talk about the colonial history of the US in Puerto Rico?” she asked of herself. “All the events made me realize that this is a kind of window into a very specific timeframe, where we can see how Puerto Rico, in this five-year period, is a vortex of so many different events.”

Divided into five themes, like “Processing, Grieving, and Reflecting” and “Ecology and Landscape,” Guerrero gathered works that primarily eschew a literal or didactic approach to discussing these topics, as she realized early on that “I could only go so far with that.”

That's to the exhibition's credit. There's a lot of Puerto Rican history that many of the works in the exhibition touch on. Rather than spelling out the background to these sociopolitical circumstances for the viewer, Guerrero wanted to “provide just enough context” to that history while still “letting the artwork speak for itself.”



Gabriella N. Báez, stitched images from “Ojalá nos encontremos el el mas” (Hopefully, We'll Meet at Sea) 2018–, installation view. PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ/COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

One of the exhibition's best works comes courtesy rising artist Gabriella N. Báez, who presents examples from her ongoing series "Ojalá nos encontremos en el mar" (Hopefully, We'll Meet at Sea). Báez began the series in 2018, two months before the one-year anniversary of Maria. She received several objects—a T-shirt, camera, photo albums, cassette tapes—that had belonged to her father, who had died by suicide several months prior. Several of those photographs show father and daughter years earlier; in this presentation, the images, standing on a plinth, are connected by dozens of strands of bright red thread. In this stitching together, Báez seems to say that those who are gone are still with us, the tendrils of our connections tenuous but still intact.

Elsewhere, Edra Soto presents an iteration of her ongoing series, "GRAFT," [now in its tenth year](#). A red-painted architectural intervention based on cast-iron fences seen throughout Puerto Rico, the piece contains images of the sky or the trees that are meant to "show the transformation of the landscape" after Maria as opposed to more graphic images of devastation and destruction, she said. "When the hurricane happened, that was probably the most depressing time of my life living in Puerto Rico. I felt in my bones that it was something that I needed to document."

"There's an intimacy and an unspoken contract of empathy" to engage with the work, by getting up close to gaze at the photographs embedded in these tiny viewfinders, Guerrero said.



Similarly, after Maria, Candida Alvarez began her acclaimed "Air Paintings" series (2017–19) as she was processing not only the hurricane but her father's death two months prior. Suspended between metal frames, her two-sided paintings toe the line between abstraction and figuration, always informed by a sense of place, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

Installation view of "no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art In The Wake Of Hurricane Maria," 2022–23, at Whitney Museum. PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

Elsewhere is the consequential section, titled “Critiques of Tourism,” in which works reflect on the long history of how Puerto Rico has been marketed to outsiders, since the '50s, as a Caribbean paradise, an “exotic” island that is not all that far from home, or to use those campaign's slogans “America's playground,” according to Guerrero.

One work in this section is a meticulous sand recreation of La Concha, an iconic hotel in San Juan, by Yiyo Tirado Rivera. Nearby, Sofía Gallisá Muriente's short film *B-Roll* (2017) presents cuts of some of these recent campaigns, showing men in suits and sunglasses flying in helicopters who gaze down at the lush archipelago. Meanwhile, a narrator states, “You can essentially minimize your taxes in a way that you can't do anywhere else in the world.”

Taken together, these works “plant the idea of who is encouraged to come and who is, maybe indirectly, forced to leave the island. This discrepancy of attention and an economy that caters to one and not the other,” Guerrero said.

This foreign investment in Puerto Rico is contrasted with the [nearly 700 public schools](#) that have closed across Puerto Rico since 2007, with several coming in the years after Maria. This reality is reflected in Miguel Luciano's *Shields/Escudos* (2020), a grouping of shields made from scrap metal culled from an abandoned school bus. On



the exterior side, Luciano has left visible the markings of the school bus, while on the side that a protestor would hold the shield, the artist has painted a black-and-white version of the Puerto Rican flag. Luciano has transformed the remains of these closed schools into something “to protect children, to protect education,” Guerrero said.

Gabriela Salazar, Reclamation (and Place, Puerto Rico), 2022, installation view. PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

On the Whitney's terrace is a site-specific installation, *Reclamation (and Place, Puerto Rico)*, from 2022, by Gabriela Salazar, which presents scaled-up versions of racks used to dry coffee in Puerto Rico, along with hexagonal pavers made from coffee clay. This brings Salazar's family history laboring in the coffee industry within the larger context of

the US's colonial relationship with Puerto Rico, which has "created an instability in Puerto Rican agricultural autonomy," she said.

Salazar added, "I came away from Maria was this frustration with how Puerto Rico has for so long been unable to have sovereignty over its infrastructure and agriculture, and not been able to put into place structures and systems that work for the island and for the people there—that are sustainable and resilient. It's no longer possible for the island to continue working under those structures."

Salazar noted that these coffee bricks are "inherently unstable," meaning they would slowly disintegrate over the course of the exhibition, which she would then replenish. It's a "Sisyphean effort of building something that will inevitably crumble—it always crumbles," Guerrero said, noting that it touches on the larger themes in the exhibition of "attempting to do something and then just being held back by neglect, politics, the colonial condition, etc."

"no existe un mundo poshuracán" touches on a disparate set of themes that artists in Puerto Rico and its diaspora are currently contemplating. There are as many responses to this moment as there are artists, but what Guerrero hopes this exhibition proposes, as she writes in her catalogue essay, is to "imagin[e] a new Puerto Rico is resolutely the purview of artists and that self-determination is a creative act. Art can be the medium of a posthurricane, postausterity, postearthquake, postpandemic world."

With this in mind, perhaps being "post-" something is an opportunity to create something anew: now that all is exposed for its rot and decay, there's no better time than imagine an alternative. As Guerrero told me, "Let's not accept the terms in which our history has been given to us. Let's build our own history, our own world."