

# A significant exhibition of Puerto Rican art—and the nationalist outlook that mars it

Clare Hurley  
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no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria, *an exhibition at the Whitney Museum, New York City, November 23, 2022–April 23, 2023*

The anniversary of a catastrophic event often serves a dual purpose, as an occasion for remembrance and mourning, but also as a reckoning. Art can play an important role in both regards, as demonstrated by the exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York (*no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria*) of “more than fifty artworks made over the last five years by an intergenerational group of more than fifteen artists from Puerto Rico and the diaspora.”

Many of the pieces powerfully convey the intensity of Hurricane Maria, the Category 5 hurricane that struck the island in September 2017. Others take up, at least in part, the questions that still demand answers—the causes of not just a natural disaster, but a social crime of this magnitude.

For two weeks in September 2017, the Caribbean island was pummeled by what was the tenth-most powerful Atlantic hurricane on record. The power grid PREPA failed, affecting up to three million inhabitants who were flooded out of their homes, and remained in the dark, often without food or drinking water, for up to months afterwards. Winds that reached 175 miles per hour virtually stripped parts of the island of vegetation, irrevocably changing its ecosystem. Nearly 5,000 people died. The devastation has yet to be fully repaired, five years on.

In terms of communicating the intensity of the storm itself, the most successful piece in the exhibition is a two-channel video by Sofía Córdova, *dawn chorus ii: el niágara en bicicleta* (2018.) Screened on a large scale at the entrance to the exhibition, the video opens with footage from the filmmaker’s aunt’s cellphone, recorded just as the storm strikes and the lights go out. Through the course of the video, we ride out the storm, peering fearfully through shuttered windows as the winds lash the deserted street. The piece also includes conversations with people in what remains of their homes after the storm has passed, interspersed with sequences of a mysterious masked woman beckoning us to follow her through ruins overgrown with tropical vegetation. Because of its unstructured length of over an hour, however, the video is more evocative than informative.

Some of the strongest pieces in the exhibition are included in the section entitled *Fractured Infrastructure*, which accurately presents Maria as a manmade disaster, not simply a natural one.

One hundred and twenty years after it was forcibly “liberated” from Spain, Puerto Rico remains an “unincorporated” territory of the United States (like Guam, American Samoa and the US Virgin Islands), considered a part of the US in some ways and not in others. Puerto Ricans do not vote for president and vice president, and have no representatives in Congress (there is a nonvoting representative, called a resident commissioner, elected every four years).

A longstanding pattern of underfunding and lack of investment outside of tourist areas was exacerbated by the financial crisis set off by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. While Wall Street was rescued by

the Obama administration’s intervention to buy up government debt through quantitative easing, i.e., the printing of money, and other measures to shore up the stock market, no such largess was extended to Puerto Rico—or to US municipalities like Detroit—which due to predatory lending practices were deeply in debt when the artificially inflated financial markets collapsed.

By 2016, financial oversight boards were set up to impose austerity measures in these largely working class areas. In the case of Congress’ so-called Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (or PROMESA, which in Spanish means “promise”), public funding was diverted to pay off the banks rather than invested in necessary infrastructure and public services. This left the island even more vulnerable to hurricanes like Maria, as well as to the tropical storms and earthquakes that regularly impact particularly the poorer areas outside San Juan.

Maria was the *eighth* consecutive hurricane and the *second* Category 5 hurricane of the 2017 season. Puerto Rico was still recovering from the damage of Hurricane Irma one month before, which had already depleted FEMA emergency supplies and left it without necessary resources to respond to yet another storm.

The scale of destruction and environmental impact revealed in the aftermath of the storm are forcefully depicted in Rogelio Báez Vega’s surreal landscapes of deserted or partial buildings with trees growing through them as in *ID. Escuela Tomás Carrión Maduro, Santurce, Puerto Rico—New on the Market* (2021). Or the overgrown remnants of a Mobil gas station in *Paraíso Móvil*, (2019.) Likewise Gamaliel Rodríguez’s magenta ink drawings of once-busy air traffic control towers being subsumed by topical vegetation have a post-apocalyptic quality. (*Figure 1832 PSE* and *Figure 1828 LMM*, both 2018.)

And the utter inadequacy of the power infrastructure is indicated by Gabriella Torres-Ferrer’s *Untitled (Valora tu mentira americana)*, (2018). With the literalism characteristic of conceptual art, an actual storm-ravaged utility pole is suspended overhead in the gallery with dangling severed wires and a tattered pro-statehood poster. The ironic subtitle, which translates to “value your American lie” is one of many indications of support for Puerto Rican independence in the exhibition.

While the needs of the population have been neglected or ignored, several of the pieces call out the exploitation of the territory’s natural beauty by the tourist industry. Sofía Gallisá Muriente’s video *B-Roll*, spliced together from the out-takes of advertising footage, showcases how the island is marketed as a tropical paradise to the highest bidder. The profligate nature of these luxury resorts is captured in another conceptual piece, Yiyo Tirado Rivera’s *La Concha* (2022), a sandcastle-style model of the 1950s “tropical modernist” San Juan hotel actually made of sand, which will crumble over the course of the exhibition.

Some pieces in the exhibition examine the experience of the hurricane through a more personal lens. In *“Ojalá nos encontremos en el mar”* (“Hopefully, we’ll meet at sea”), (2018) Gabriella N. Báez memorializes

her father, who committed suicide after Maria, by stitching old photos of the two of them together through their eyes with long red threads, thus creating a fragile, posthumous bond.

Notwithstanding the sincerity of many of the artists, however, the unequivocal Puerto Rican nationalism and identity politics that shape the exhibition detract from its impact. In ways that are subtle, and some not so subtle, curators Marcela Guerrero, Angelica Arbelaez, and Sofia Silva have tailored the show to advocate a pro-independence agenda. The presentation suggests that such disasters are unique to or uniquely bad in Puerto Rico because of US colonialism, in the words of the wall captions, which oppresses the territory's native "population of color." Everything is done to separate the experiences of the Puerto Rican working class from that of the global and North American working class as a whole.

So for instance, it is notable that not a single piece in the exhibition included a blue "tarp" (tarpaulin), which has become a ubiquitous presence, even unofficial symbol, of natural disasters. It has been incorporated in the artwork of multiple artists and designers beginning after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Only 12 years before Maria, New Orleans witnessed a similar abandonment of an entire city to the destruction of a hurricane by all levels of the political establishment of both political parties, from Mayor Ray Nagin up to President G. W. Bush. Though at 1,800 Katrina's death toll was far lower than Maria's, it likewise exposed in the starkest of terms that the underlying class inequality of a social system was the decisive factor in who survived and who did not.

The omission in particular of the work by Puerto Rican artist Daniel Lind-Ramos, who used the blue tarp to powerful symbolic effect in his sculpture *Maria Maria* (2019), is all the more noticeable because he had been selected for the Whitney's own Biennial by the same curator. Perhaps after receiving a \$625,000 MacArthur Genius award in 2021, his work simply was not available. But the absence of even a reference to Katrina serves to reinforce the exhibition's insistence on Puerto Rico's uniqueness.

Several of the pieces address the mass political protests that erupted in the summer of 2019 and forced the resignation of Gov. Ricardo Rosselló, though the full implications of this social upheaval were barely touched on by the art itself. The explicitly "political" pieces include a wall-sized array of printed posters that had been posted on Instagram by Garvin Sierra Vega (2019–22) and a standing row of black and white metal shields in the shape of the Puerto Rican flag by Miguel Luciano (*Shields/Escudos*, 2020.)

In her catalog essay, curator Marcela Guerrero describes the protests "as much an aesthetic rally as an attempt to rebuild the nation. Groups of mostly feminist, queer, Black, and working-class people were the architects of that blissful summer, which saw people dancing perreo in the Catedral de San Juan Bautista, a cavalcade of horseback riders descending on the capitol, and near the governor's mansion, a yoga session serenely clamoring for Rosselló's resignation."

Far more than just a colorful yoga fest, the involvement of tens of thousands of people of different skin colors, genders and sexual orientations in the months-long popular protests was highly significant. They succeeded in ousting both a hated Wall Street stooge and his replacement in quick succession, a fact anxiously noted in governors' mansions across the US, as well as in the Trump White House and Democratic Party circles. If it hadn't been for the petty bourgeois nationalist outlook of the protests' leaders and the political forces behind them that sought to isolate the protests within Puerto Rico, this rallying cry would have found a broad sympathetic hearing. The working class on the mainland is no less familiar with the rapacious lending of the banks, and the ineptitude and rampant corruption of local politicians.

Nor is the ruling elite's blatant indifference to the loss of life, particularly of poorer, working class layers of the population in "natural" disasters like floods, blizzards, wildfires and earthquakes exclusive to

Puerto Rico, though this was indeed a damning exposure. The death toll from Maria was covered up by Rosselló's administration for almost a year, as it absurdly maintained that only 65 people had been killed until independent studies forced it to acknowledge that the true death toll was at least 4,645. The government's failure to secure adequate aid had already had its consequences; the dead were jokingly referred to among Rosselló's cronies in text messages as "food for crows."

However, the exhibition makes no connection to the same process of enforced bankruptcy and receivership as PROMESA being carried out, for example, in Detroit in 2013, let alone the international context of Syriza's austerity measures in Greece being challenged by mass protests in 2011.

Instead, the exhibition attributes the social aspects of Maria's destruction and subsequent loss of life almost exclusively to Puerto Rico's commonwealth status. Acquired as part of the spoils in the aftermath of the one-sided Spanish-American war in 1898, the US government continues to maintain Puerto Rico in a semi-colonial limbo, which has allowed it to exploit its resources and profit from its cheap labor force, a substantial portion of which regularly emigrates to escape the economic hardship of the island in search of better employment opportunities on the mainland.

Something of this history is obliquely referenced by Gamaliel Rodriguez's *Collapsed Soul* (2020-21), a striking blue and black painting of a ship exploding at sea. The actual incident depicted is the 2015 sinking, in a hurricane, of an antiquated US cargo vessel on its way from Florida to San Juan with food, building materials and medical supplies. However, the image likewise recalls the bombing of the USS Maine in February 1898, which was used as a pretext ("Remember the Maine") for US imperialism to launch the Spanish-American War in order to "liberate" the Spanish colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and the Philippines.

Though the US was unable to maintain direct control of Cuba and the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Hawaii were annexed as territories, with Hawaii admitted to statehood in 1959. However it is not simply colonialism, as the exhibition curators would have it, but the capitalist system itself that keeps the Puerto Rican population in social misery.

More than a hundred years on, American imperialism is no longer emergent, but in a state of terminal crisis. The American establishment has presided over a homicidal pandemic policy, along with multiplying and worsening climate-related disasters. The ruling class has poured billions of dollars into its proxy war with Russia in Ukraine. To pay for all its catastrophes the American bourgeoisie will impose austerity measures not only on the Puerto Rican, but the working class in every state and territory.

The privileged, petty bourgeois outlook expressed by the exhibition officialdom, on the other hand, calls for Puerto Rican "sovereignty" and the promotion of Puerto Rican entrepreneurs and local businesses, all the better for this layer to get rich by exploiting its "own" working class. It will be no more inclined or equipped to respond to hurricanes or any other climate, or economic, catastrophes that are on the agenda.



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