

# WHITNEY

Whitney Museum  
of American Art  
Press Office

99 Gansevoort Street  
New York, NY 10014

pressoffice@whitney.org  
(212) 570-3633

# PRESS RELEASE

## THE WHITNEY MUSEUM PRESENTS THE FIRST MAJOR U.S. MUSEUM SURVEY OF PUERTO RICAN ART IN NEARLY FIFTY YEARS



***The exhibition no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria Reveals the Political, Economic, and Cultural Impact of Hurricane Maria and Its Aftermath and Explores a Period of Transformation through the Work of Twenty Artists from Puerto Rico and the Diaspora***

**New York, NY, September 15, 2022** — The Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibition *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria* brings together over fifty works by an intergenerational group of twenty artists from Puerto Rico and the diaspora whose art has responded to the transformation brought on by Hurricane Maria—a high-end category four storm that hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017. Organized to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the storm, the exhibition is defined by the larger context in which the devastation was exacerbated by historic events that preceded and followed this defining moment. The first scholarly survey of contemporary Puerto Rican art presented by a major U.S. museum in nearly half a century, the exhibition is organized by Marcela Guerrero, Jennifer Rubio Associate Curator, with Angelica Arbelaez, Rubio Butterfield Family Fellow, and Sofia

Silva, former Curatorial & Education Fellow in US Latinx Art, Whitney Museum. *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria* will be on view from November 23, 2022, through April 23, 2023.

The exhibition takes its title, *no existe un mundo poshuracán*, roughly translated as “a post-hurricane world doesn’t exist,” from a poem by Puerto Rican poet Raquel Salas Rivera, featured in the exhibition as an artwork. Through painting, video, installation, performance, poetry, and newly commissioned works created for the show, the exhibition looks at the five years since Hurricane Maria to highlight urgent and resonant concerns in Puerto Rico, including the trauma created by fractured infrastructures; the devastation of ecological histories and landscapes; loss, reflection, and grieving; resistance and protest; and an economically-driven migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States during an upswell of American tourism and relocation to the island.

The artists in *no existe un mundo poshuracán* seek to analyze the fracturing created by the storm in the very structure of Puerto Rico’s politics, culture, and society. They are Candida Alvarez, Gabriella N. Báez, Rogelio Báez Vega, Sofía Córdova, Danielle De Jesus, Frances Gallardo, Sofía Gallisá Muriente, Miguel Luciano, Javier Orfón, Elle Pérez, Gamaliel Rodríguez, Raquel Salas Rivera, Gabriela Salazar, Armig Santos, Garvin Sierra Vega, Edra Soto, Awilda Sterling-Duprey, Yiyó Tirado Rivera, Gabriella Torres-Ferrer, and Lulu Varona.

“The artists in this exhibition challenge us to understand the historical, physical, and political forces that have shaped Puerto Rico, and to see both our own responsibility and vulnerability,” said Adam D. Weinberg, the Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney Museum. “Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria is a harbinger of things to come for those who are most vulnerable, not just in the Caribbean, but worldwide.”

On September 7, 2017, Hurricane Irma skirted Puerto Rico, followed by Hurricane Maria, which made landfall less than two weeks later. Crises that had been accumulating before the hurricanes intersected overwhelmingly with the events that erupted in Maria’s wake. Economic austerity measures had been implemented in Puerto Rico just a year before the storms, prolonging the disinvestment in infrastructure; a political scandal ignited large-scale street protests that resulted in the ouster of Governor Ricardo Roselló in the summer of 2019; and a series of earthquakes and tremors destroyed homes and schools in the southern part of the archipelago in early 2020, only a few months before the arrival of COVID-19. Recovery from the storms and the events that followed continues to be hindered by ongoing electrical blackouts, school closures, and rising housing costs created by massive gentrification.

“*no existe un mundo poshuracán* proposes that imagining a new Puerto Rico is absolutely and resolutely the purview of artists,” noted Guerrero, who worked in close collaboration with the artists throughout the planning of the exhibition and visited artists’ studios across the continental U.S. and in Puerto Rico. “The future of self-determination is inherently a creative act. Art can be the medium of a post-hurricane, post-austerity, post-earthquake, and post-pandemic world. This exhibition is a call to see the living and an invitation to pay tribute to the dead.”

The exhibition examines artists’ evocations of and responses to the transformative events of the last five years in five thematic sections:

### **Fractured Infrastructures**

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria exposed the dated infrastructures that failed Puerto Ricans at their most vulnerable, including a severely damaged electric grid that left

thousands without power for months following the storm. Years of neglect continued to accumulate following the 2015 revelation of a debilitating national debt and the implementation of new austerity measures mandated by the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) law, passed by the United States Congress in 2016. In early 2020, earthquakes and their aftershocks caused additional significant harm to homes and schools, particularly in the south of the main island, with residents having to return to these precarious homes almost immediately in order to quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gabriella Torres-Ferrer's sculpture *Untitled (Valora tu mentira americana)* [Value Your American Lie], 2018, symbolizes the collapse of infrastructures following the hurricane and undermines the belief in the protective power of U.S. citizenship. In the work, a single wooden electric post found among the storm's debris is positioned diagonally as if in mid-fall. It still bears a propagandistic sign urging voters to value their American citizenship.

The large-scale painting *ID. Escuela Tomás Carrión Maduro, Santurce, Puerto Rico—New on the Market* (2021) by Rogelio Báez Vega depicts an elementary school in a state of eerie and unsettling abandonment, referencing the alarming increase in public school closures and the subsequent sale of their buildings to private real estate investors. The work mourns the continued loss of such important institutions and condemns the Puerto Rican government for failing to protect schools from further decline.

### **Critiques of Tourism**

Following Hurricane Maria, migration grew exponentially, with some 150,000 migrants (4.3% of the population) leaving permanently. This economically driven migration and relocation of Puerto Ricans to other parts of the United States took place concurrently with policies that provide tax breaks and other financial benefits to American tourists, investors, and entrepreneurs coming to the island. Underlying this economic phenomenon are Acts 20 and Act 22 of 2012, which offer tax havens to U.S. corporations and wealthy individuals—many of them real estate and cryptocurrency speculators.

Sofía Gallisá Muriente's video collage *B-Roll* (2017) is a parody of promotional videos aimed at attracting foreign investors to speculate in real estate and cryptocurrencies in Puerto Rico. Appropriated from videos produced by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company and the Department of Economic Development and Commerce of Puerto Rico, the artist remixed the B-roll footage to highlight common tropes in the marketing campaigns. Composed by Daniel Montes Carro, the electronic music that accompanies *B-Roll* combines audio taken from the videos with field recordings from the 2016 Puerto Rico Investment Summit.

Yiyo Tirado Rivera's *La Concha* (2022) is one of a series of sandcastle sculptures made in the shape of iconic hotels located in San Juan since the 1940s. Over time, the sandcastles slowly deteriorate, referencing the perils of building Puerto Rico's infrastructure around foreign consumption. The work also addresses ecological concerns by alluding to the persistent coastline erosion caused by storms, further exacerbated by the construction of hotels and other luxury properties by the sea.

### **Processing, Grieving, Reflecting**

Seared into the minds of Puerto Ricans is the number 4,645—the citizens who died as a direct or indirect consequence of Hurricane Maria. Until 2018, the official death toll was sixty-four, laying bare the government's apparent disregard for its citizens and an attitude of negligence toward the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Scientific and investigative reporting in the

aftermath of the hurricane found alarming increases in deaths from accidents, cardiac conditions, diabetes, suicides, and potentially deadly yet preventable infectious diseases.

Rendering grief materially and poetically through personal perspectives are Gabriella Báez's *Ojalá nos encontremos en el mar* (2018–ongoing) and Raquel Salas Rivera's book of poems *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)*. Báez presents a cache of ephemera and photographs of objects that once belonged to her father, who died by suicide two months before the first anniversary of Hurricane Maria. Attempting to understand his trauma as well as her own, the artist created interventions in some of the photos, connecting the eyes and hands of the images of herself and her father with red thread, thereby affixing their bond in perpetuity.

### **Ecology & Landscapes**

The environmental impact of Hurricane Maria cannot be understated. The 157-mile-per-hour winds and torrential rains caused inestimable damage and widespread destruction to Puerto Rico's vegetation, dramatically transforming the landscape and altering the ecosystem. Artists in the exhibition respond by documenting the scenery in ways that respect the land and draw attention to its vulnerable state.

Javier Orfón's photographs of Cupey leaves that he has drawn on and inscribed with phrases uttered by forest rangers—such as “No reconozco plantas muertas (I don't recognize dead plants)”—speak to the urgent threats against nature while emphasizing the limits of natural science collections: indexing will not save nature from the devastation of climate change.

### **Resistance, Protest**

The Summer of 2019, or *Verano del 19* as it became known in Puerto Rico, was marked by ongoing public protests following the revelation of a series of text messages between Governor Ricardo Roselló and other government officials disparaging individuals and certain segments of the populace, including the hurricane's victims. Large groups of protestors took to the streets of San Juan and Chicago, New York, Madrid, and other cities worldwide, creating a viral uprising under the hashtag #RickyRenuncia [Resign Ricky]. The announcement of Roselló's resignation on July 24, 2019, jubilantly affirmed that a popular call for political action could transform into a historic win for the nation.

Throughout that summer, the Instagram account of graphic design artist and sculptor Garvin Sierra, @tallergraficopr, became a wide-reaching platform for updates on current events and national grievances. With color and compositional elements borrowed from an instantly recognizable 1950s art movement associated with Puerto Rico and overlaid images and phrases, Sierra's digital posters employed an economy of design and the spontaneity of social media to provide breaking news and information to citizens and people around the world.

The impact of graphic design is also evident in Miguel Luciano's *Shields* (2020), a sculptural installation of ten “shields” made from the metal armor of decommissioned Puerto Rican school buses—vehicles that would have once protected children while in transit to local schools. Each piece features a Puerto Rican flag painted in black and white on the inside as a symbol of dissent, along with a handle that would allow them to be used, quite literally, as shields. As a response to the closure of schools in recent years due to the hurricanes, earthquakes, debt crisis, austerity measures, and corruption, the works evoke a defense of the island's young people and their right to self-determination.

## **Catalogue**

An accompanying exhibition catalogue, *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria*, published by the Whitney and distributed by Yale University Press. Ranging from university professors to activists and performers, the catalogue's contributors represent a new generation of Puerto Rican intellectuals who reveal, often in poignant and personal terms, the ways art offers a path through adversity. Like the exhibition, the catalogue reflects a collective awakening grounded in resistance that disrupts colonial infrastructure and asserts that self-determination is a creative act.

Contributors include Marcela Guerrero, Marina Reyes Franco, Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, Karriann Soto Vega, Diego Alcalá Laboy, Yarimar Bonilla, Macha Colón, Ramón Cruz, Carina del Valle Schorske, Arcadio Díaz-Quñones, Angélica Negrón, and Ana Teresa Toro.

Copies are available for purchase online and in the Whitney Shop (\$45). A Spanish version will be available in PDF format free of charge.

## **Free Public Programs**

A series of free virtual and in-person programs will be offered in conjunction with *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria*, including conversations with featured artists and programs exploring urgent themes and questions raised by the exhibition. More information about these programs and how to register will be [available on the Museum's website](#) as details are confirmed.

### **El bello no ser de nuestros cuerpos / Our Bodies' Beautiful Not Being: A reading for *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane María***

**December 4, 2–6 pm**

Curated by poet Raquel Salas Rivera, this reading expands on the exhibition's title, *no existe un mundo poshuracán*, with an intergenerational group of poets addressing the ways Puerto Ricans continuously create from “nothingness”—making a life, a way forward, and even beauty, despite colonialism's erasure and violence.

Readers include: Xavier Valcárcel, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, Irizelma Robles, Roberto Ncar, Sandra Nia Rodríguez, Francisco Félix, Veronica Reza, Gaddiel Francisco Ruiz Rivera, Nicole Cecilia Delgado, Mara Pastor, Rubén Ramos Colón, Yara Liceaga, Urayoán Noel, Willie Perdomo, Denice Frohman, Giannina Braschi, Edwin Torres, Elizabet Velásquez, and Joey de Jesús.

**Location:** Susan and John Hess Family Theater and Gallery, Whitney Museum of American Art

## **Press Preview**

The Whitney Museum will host a press preview on Thursday, November 17, 10 am–12 pm. A photography and broadcast hour will start at 9 am. Remarks by Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator, and Marcela Guerrero, Jennifer Rubio Associate Curator, will begin at 10:30 am.

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## PRESS CONTACT

For press materials and image requests, please visit our press site at [whitney.org/press](http://whitney.org/press) or contact:

### **Ashley Reese, Assistant Director of Communications**

Whitney Museum of American Art

(212) 671-1846

[Ashley\\_Reese@whitney.org](mailto:Ashley_Reese@whitney.org)

### **Whitney Press Office**

[whitney.org/press](http://whitney.org/press)

(212) 570-3633

[pressoffice@whitney.org](mailto:pressoffice@whitney.org)

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## EXHIBITION SUPPORT

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The exhibition is part of the Whitney's emerging artists program, sponsored by

## NORDSTROM

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The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

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## ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney’s mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

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## VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are: Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 11 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Member-only hours are: Saturday and Sunday, 10:30–11 am. Visitors eighteen years and under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. COVID-19 vaccination and face coverings are not required but strongly recommended. We encourage all visitors to wear face coverings that cover the nose and mouth throughout their visit.

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### Image Caption:

Gamaliel Rodríguez, *Collapsed Soul*, 2020–21. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 84 × 112 in. (213.3 × 284.5 cm). © 2021 Gamaliel Rodríguez. Courtesy the artist and Nathalie Karg Gallery NYC. Photograph by Gamaliel Rodríguez

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