

# MARIA'S WAKE: PUERTO RICAN ART, 2017–2022

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*Hay huracanes que arrasan un país y  
hay países que se tragan los  
huracanes . . . y los devuelven.*

(There are hurricanes that ravage a country and  
there are countries that swallow  
hurricanes . . . and spit them back.)  
—Ana Teresa Toro

Survival is a creative act.  
—Ocean Vuong

A birth, in a way, is the opposite of a blackout.<sup>1</sup> The month before Hurricane Maria made landfall on September 20, 2017, my daughter was born in a New York City hospital. I was far from my hometown of Río Piedras, but I was glad she would begin life in a city with tight connections to the nation where I was from. Just a month into motherhood, I saw the archipelago subsumed within a darkness that was as literal as it was metaphoric. The irony was painfully clear that as I nursed my child in those early days of her life, many Puerto Rican lives would be lost as a consequence of the storm.

Life would not be the same, goes the aphorism. While that may be true, life in Puerto Rico had already been altered, many times throughout its history. The most recent transformative event had occurred in 2015, when it first became known that Puerto Rico had amassed, and was incapable of paying, a massive debt of \$72 billion, plus \$50 billion in pension obligations. Due to expiring tax breaks for US corporations that operated in Puerto Rico, and the steep economic downturn that gripped the United States beginning in 2007, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost, especially from the pharmaceutical companies that operated manufacturing plants on the archipelago. In 2016, the US Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act—PROMESA, which, with cruel irony, means *promise* in Spanish. The legislation established a fiscal-oversight board responsible for managing the debt, largely through austerity measures that would ravage public services such as education, infrastructure, and health care. In a clever linguistic rebuttal, the board has

become known as La Junta, accurately translating the word *board* into Spanish while also letting Congress know how these overseers are really seen in Puerto Rico—as a colonial version of the Latin American military juntas of the 1960s and 1970s.

Against this perverse backdrop, Hurricane Maria made landfall in 2017. The crises that had been accumulating were compounded by subsequent events, then multiplied by the enormous trauma caused by the utter disregard of the local and federal governments to give Puerto Ricans a dignified life. In 2022, blackouts remain constant, schools continue to close, residents are being priced out of their homes, and inflation keeps rising. The conditions of life in Puerto Rico, some have said, make living there impossible. As a city of the dead—a necropolis—is how many Puerto Rican thinkers have viewed the archipelago post-Maria (fig. 1). An extension of Frantz Fanon's postcolonial thinking, necropower was first theorized by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe as the fundamental condition of colonialism.<sup>2</sup> In necropolitics, sovereign countries have the power to define the conditions of life and death for their subjects. Hilda Lloréns and Maritza Stanchich have articulated the concept with regard to Puerto Rico. "The focus on paying the debt over protecting Puerto Rican lives and environment is illustrative of the extractivist, exploitative nature of the colonial relationship itself," they write. "The perpetration of 'slow violence,'" the scholars continue, "through enactment of neoliberal policies that have increased dispossession via the loss of life, land, and environmental health—while global financial capital continues to accumulate wealth at the expense of Puerto Rico's communities—has long inscribed Puerto Rican lives as expendable."<sup>3</sup> Surviving death is the *modus operandi*.

However relentless and debilitating these forces feel at times, Puerto Ricans have continually resisted their own disappearance. In 2019, with the unique combination of courage and despair that more than five hundred years of colonization can produce, the people chose to imagine a different outcome for themselves and for those 4,645 Puerto Ricans who perished as a consequence of the hurricane. That summer, exhilarated and jubilant masses stood against and removed then-governor Ricardo Rosselló from power. The Verano del 19, as it became known, was a historic win for the nation.

The ouster demonstrated the people's ability to defeat an incompetent politician, whose venality had been exposed through a leaked chain of Telegram messages with his cronies in which he crassly attacked virtually every sector of the populace, including the hurricane's victims. The triumph also represented a point of no return, a refusal to be powerless. The viral cry of #YoNoMeDejo (I will not allow it) echoed throughout the world.<sup>4</sup> A collective catharsis, the Verano del 19 saw protest manifested in myriad creative ways, producing images that offered an exciting counterpoint to the tropes of a barren nation perpetuated in mainstream media in the aftermath of the hurricane (figs. 2–3). Protests were 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.<sup>5</sup> A panoramic view of those days would yield an image of a national wake—a *velorio* in defense of the dead.



Fig. 1 Graffiti ("They're killing us") on a wall in San Juan, 2021

As much as the Verano del 19 rocked the political foundations of Puerto Rico, what followed would again put the archipelago to the test. Six months after the removal of Rosselló, a chain of earthquakes shook houses and schools on the southern coast, destroying many and replacing the joy of that hopeful summer with fear. Around the same time, an increase in femicides, transphobic murders, and domestic violence cases became another public health emergency. Then the pandemic arrived. Despite imposing a strict lockdown in the early weeks of the arrival of COVID-19, the Puerto Rican government's lack of transparency, plus the self-interest of politicians wanting to reopen the economy during an election year, left the population once again misinformed and, perhaps worst of all, despondent.

*No existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria* borrows its title from a line in Raquel Salas Rivera's book of poems *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)*.<sup>6</sup> The verse resists facile translation, but in English, it yields, "A posthurricane world doesn't exist," or "There isn't a world posthurricane." The awkwardness of this second phrase is the more productive for the purposes

of this exhibition. Contained within its clumsy syntax in English is a rearranging of a world order that never considered Puerto Rico to be an example from which the rest of the world could learn. Post-Maria Puerto Rico is a harbinger of things to come for those who are most vulnerable, not just in the Caribbean but worldwide. There is no place on earth that is safe from the colossal gusts of the climate crisis and capitalist colonization. A posthurricane world doesn't exist.

Put differently, what would it require to imagine a future beyond this current maelstrom? *No existe un mundo poshuracán* wrestles with the fact that the real disaster is the thought of its perpetuity, the belief that Puerto Ricans are and will continue to be caught in the wake of Maria. Respectfully inspired by the work of Christina Sharpe, I summon the wake as a way to invoke multiple meanings.<sup>7</sup> Hurricane Maria did not happen in a vacuum; it happened in and to a nation carrying in the wake of its history the vestiges of Spanish colonization, followed by the American colonial project. Present-day Puerto Rico is, metaphorically speaking, the flotsam and jetsam of this double colonization. Those who survived the storm quickly realized that the aftermath of the hurricane was going to be a perpetual vigil over those who did not. In that sense, the wake is being unable to transcend this moment—these crises and catastrophes—without draconian austerity measures on the one hand and the infusion of lucrative tax breaks for outsiders on the other. Not being able to imagine a posthurricane moment forecloses the possibility to craft a Puerto Rico for and by Puerto Ricans. This is a form of colonial death, leave no doubt about it.

But there is another way to understand *no existe un mundo poshuracán*, one that does not negate or gaslight a very real sense of angst and defeat but that sublimates these feelings into what Yarimar Bonilla calls hopeful pessimism. "Unlike a cruel optimism that blinds us to the threats of the present," Bonilla argues, "a hopeful pessimism opens our eyes to the hard tasks required to transform the here and now."<sup>8</sup> Seen through the lens of hopeful pessimism, *no existe un mundo poshuracán* rejects this world altogether in favor of the creation of new modes of existing politically. As a poetic verse conceived in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Maria, Salas Rivera's line stakes a claim for artists to be stewards of imagining this new future.

*No existe un mundo poshuracán* brings together artworks made in the last five years by an intergenerational group of artists born in Puerto Rico and its diaspora between the 1940s and the 1990s. These artists are not necessarily concerned with representing Hurricane Maria. Rather, they seek to analyze the structural cracks left by the storm. They denounce the pervasive and ubiquitous ways in which the Puerto Rican necropolis is the ultimate expression of its colonization. For them, *to resist* is a multidimensional, multimedia verb that forcefully shakes the infrastructure of the colonial design.

The contrast between the images of Hurricane Maria, pushed by news outlets and consumed from the outside, and those of the Verano del 19 suggests that there is more to the visual discourse of Puerto Rico than images of destruction. In the years after Maria, artists of all genres have added nuance to the words of politicians and to the media coverage, attempting to redress a wound that had been left without any poetics. The outpouring of creative expression that has happened in these years, which includes music, performance, theater, poetry, graphic design, visual arts, and even memes, can accurately be described as a Puerto Rican renaissance, a rebirth in the face of death. This exhibition looks at the lyrical ways in which art can serve as a vehicle of denunciation as well as an agent of change.



Fig. 2 A damaged road west of San Juan after Hurricane Maria, September 2017



Fig. 3 Protests shutting down the Expreso Las Américas highway, San Juan, July 2019

Sofía Córdova's video *dawn\_chorus ii: el niágara en bicicleta* (*dawn\_chorus ii: crossing the niagara on a bicycle*, 2018; pages 74–77) opens with almost pitch-black cell phone footage taken by the artist's aunt, Maggie, as she narrates the first hours of the hurricane after the power had gone out. The magnitude of the event, the fact that it is worth being recorded for posterity, is clear in these first scenes as Maggie uses what in the subsequent days and months would become a precious commodity, cell phone battery, to document her surroundings, including her pets. Interlacing raw first-person accounts recorded by Córdova's family members and friends are lyrical vignettes accompanied by salsa songs—in particular, tunes referencing storms that Córdova culled from her late grandfather's music collection. Some of these moments find a group of women and nonbinary dancers with their backs turned to the camera moving about the brush. At another point, the recurring figure of a Black woman whose face is covered walks around a thicket as she forebodingly assesses ruins. In *dawn\_chorus ii*, documentation and speculation meet as a response to what has happened and what the future holds. Córdova's video combines the ineffable with unvarnished chronicles of destruction. One does not supersede the other; both are needed to understand life after the storm.

Gabriella Torres-Ferrer's installation *Untitled (Valora tu mentira americana)* (*Untitled [Value Your American Lie]*, 2018; pages 112–13) consists of a wooden lamppost found among the debris after the hurricane, propped diagonally against a wall and still bearing a propagandistic sign urging voters to value their American citizenship. The work captures various infrastructures that collapsed in the wake of Maria—the dated electrical grid, with its reliance on carbon fuels controlled by a bankrupt PREPA (Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority); the

fiction that American citizenship would protect Puerto Ricans against the catastrophic effects of such calamities; and the supposedly symmetrical relationship of power with the United States. Rogelio Báez Vega's paintings take up a different, older failed infrastructure: the failed modernist project on the archipelago. In works including *Paradox of the New Landscape IV* (2018, page 73) and *Paraíso móvil* (2019, page 73), Báez Vega frequently pits historically important buildings associated with the golden era of modernist architecture of the 1950s against a not-so-implausible scenario of bankruptcy and decay as the tropical landscape confronts habitations. In these dystopian settings, human presence has been replaced by a ghostly sense of abandonment. His embrace of anachronism rejects not only the present but also the future that has been spelled out for Puerto Rico.

Edra Soto's ongoing project titled *GRAFT* (2013–22, pages 106–7) is also concerned with the legacies of architecture. The series, which seeks to acknowledge the peripatetic history of vernacular design in Puerto Rican and diasporic architecture through the motif of *rejas* and *quiebrasoles* (wrought-iron and concrete fences, respectively), has lately included slide viewers through which the audience can witness photographs taken by Soto of a landscape ravaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The realization that the viewfinders act like windows looking outside creates an interesting shift in perspective. What could have been interpreted as the voyeuristic act of gawking at others' misfortune is turned around to convey the intimate act of being inside a typical middle-class home in Puerto Rico and sharing the same view. Empathy is achieved in ways that similar images consumed through mainstream media could never attain.

Other types of built environment appear in Gabriela Salazar's *Reclamation (and Place, Puerto Rico)* (2022, page 100). Made specifically for *no existe un mundo poshuracán*, the work reimagines coffee-drying racks in ways that reclaim one of the archipelago's staple crops, and agriculture writ large, for the people's own benefit. The brown-stained cloths, resting on the beds that make up the structure, evoke sheet-covered bodies in a mortuary. The reclamation of the title thus surpasses its English meaning to include the sense of claim or complaint conveyed by the Spanish *reclamación*. The act of reclaiming the fruits of the soil on behalf of those Black and Brown people who were lost as a consequence of the storm ought to be the foundation of any rebuilding project. The failure to provide Puerto Ricans with sound buildings and infrastructures has become at best an everyday neglect, at worst nothing short of a conspiracy to drive Puerto Ricans off the archipelago.

In his painting *Collapsed Soul* (2020–21, pages 96–97), Gamaliel Rodríguez ponders the ship as a symbol of life and death. Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States began after the explosion of the USS *Maine* in 1898, which gave way to the Spanish-American War. More recently, the archipelago's dependency on tourism brought it COVID-19, when an Italian tourist who fell sick on a cruise from Fort Lauderdale became Puerto Rico's patient zero and its first reported death from the disease. And in the aftermath of Maria, shipping was a critical lifeline—humanitarian aid coming from international seas could not readily dock, limiting access to basic supplies. The Jones Act, established in 1920, restricts foreign-water vessels from delivering goods to Puerto Rico; transportation of cargo between US ports can only happen on ships that are built, owned, and crewed by US citizens. In a place where 85 percent of the food is imported, transport by sea is and will continue to be a vital conduit for Puerto Ricans until food sovereignty can be obtained. Overwater vessels, such as the imploding ship in Rodríguez's painting, are

Water Cyclists Pedal Past the Caribe Hilton. All 300 Rooms Face the Atlantic; Each Has Its Private Balcony.  
This \$5,200,000 hostelry, Puerto Rico's newest social center, stands on a promontory. Sea breezes sweep through its open lobby.

Photo and design by Walker

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Advertisement for Caribe Hilton



Fig. 4 Advertisement for the Caribe Hilton, San Juan, c. 1951



Fig. 5 Candida Alvarez, *Howlings—Soft Paintings*, 2017–19 (installation view, Riverwalk, Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive, Chicago). Latex on PVC mesh, four panels: 200 × 14–17 ft. (61 × 4.3–5.2 m) overall

more than symbolic—they represent the alpha and omega of the structural dependency at the core of Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Another piece of transportation infrastructure, the airport control tower, appears in a series of Rodríguez’s drawings. The overgrowth of the towers by nature and the eerie use of magenta in works such as *Figure 1828 BQN* (2018, page 98) transports the buildings from present reality to a dystopian future where the emptying of Puerto Rico renders these symbols of tourism useless.

The exploitation of Puerto Rico’s tax-haven status—which was enhanced in 2012 with the passing of Acts 20 and 22, benefiting corporations and individuals, respectively—has surged since Maria. Sofia Gallisá Muriente’s video collage *B-Roll* (2017, page 82) parodies promotional videos aimed to attract foreign investors to speculate in real estate and cryptocurrencies. Gallisá Muriente uses actual B-roll, or secondary footage, from videos produced by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company and the Department of Economic Development and Commerce of Puerto Rico, remixing them to highlight common marketing tropes. The electronic-music soundtrack, composed by Daniel Montes Carro, combines audio taken from the videos with field recordings from the 2016 Puerto Rico Investment Summit.

The language used to sell Puerto Rico as a place where white Americans go on vacation has not changed much since the 1950s and 1960s, when its rums and hotels appeared prominently in magazine advertisements (fig. 4). Hotels built at the time were viewed skeptically by locals who saw the downside in service-oriented modernization, dependency on American tourism, rapid gentrification, and irreversible environmental change.<sup>9</sup> Seizing on the trope of Puerto Rico as

“America’s playground,” as the archipelago was often characterized, Yiyo Tirado Rivera builds *castillos de arena*, or sandcastles, in the shape of iconic hotels from this period. *Caribe Hilton* (2020, pages 110–11), which shows a signature hotel that opened in 1949, speaks to the entropic logic of designing Puerto Rico’s infrastructure around foreign consumption. The slow degradation of the sandcastle hotel over the course of its exhibition suggests not only the risk of abandonment that other hotels have faced as the economy continues to worsen but also points to the lack of mitigation of coastline erosion caused by the storms and exacerbated by the construction of hotels and other luxury properties by the sea.

The environmental impact of Hurricane Maria cannot be understated. In the face of so much ecological damage, artists have responded by documenting the scenery in a way that respects the land while also drawing attention to the dangers for it that lie ahead. Javier Orfón’s photographs (pages 90–91) show cupey leaves that he has drawn on and incised with phrases uttered to him by forest rangers, such as “No reconozco plantas muertas” (I don’t recognize dead plants). The works perfectly encapsulate the anthropocene, simultaneously speaking to the ongoing demise of nature and the inability of humans to relate to a dead environment. The photographic medium further emphasizes the limits of natural-science collections: indexing will not save nature from the devastation of anthropogenic change. The affective bonds between people and place also inform the work of Candida Alvarez, a painter born in Brooklyn to Puerto Rican parents. In her *Air Paintings* (2017–19, pages 62–67), the artist transformed several proofs of her mural *Howlings—Soft Paintings* (fig. 5) that were printed on PVC mesh, adding latex ink and



Fig. 6 Activists placing a cross atop an American tank in memory of David Sanes Rodríguez, Vieques, Puerto Rico, April 1999



Fig. 7 Victims of the Ponce massacre, Puerto Rico, 1937

acrylic paint. She began the series after two dramatic events in her life: her father passed away a few months before Maria, and her mother decided to relocate to the US. Suspended from a freestanding aluminum frame, the works are meant to be seen from both sides, pushing the genre of painting into sculpture. With titles such as *Lomas* (*Mountains*, 2018; pages 86–87), Alvarez suggests a dynamic, multivalent view of the Puerto Rican landscape as seen through the memories of a Diasporican. While one side of *Lomas* recalls the lush, verdant setting of the Central Mountain Range of Puerto Rico, especially the town of Villalba, where her family home still stands, the other offers a faint sketch suggestive of the landscape in its wrecked post-Maria state. The *Air Paintings* function less as topographical records and more as landscapes of the artist's memories in the face of grief.

This theme of mourning, whether over the loss of loved ones or the natural environment, is indelibly present in *no existe un mundo poshuracán*. Sofía Gallisá Muriente's film *Celaje* (*Cloudscape*, 2020; pages 84–85) approaches death with a nuanced understanding of nostalgia, failure, and decay. Combining original and found footage with biodeterioration of the celluloid stock and artisanal film-development techniques, *Celaje* is an elegy for the many who have died during these years of overlapping disasters, including the artist's grandmother. It also serves as an elegy for the promise of the Estado Libre Asociado—the commonwealth project that began in Puerto Rico in 1952 and whose always-dubious viability as an option for the nation's future has plummeted since 2016. *Celaje* testifies to the ways memories of both personal and political events form, change, and dissipate like passing clouds.

The opposite could be said of Frances Gallardo's *Aerosoles* (*Aerosols*) (2021–22, pages 80–81), in which particles from dust clouds that travel from the Sahara Desert to the Caribbean become visible to the eye. A phenomenon familiar to the region but one that has grown to pernicious levels in the last few years, the sandstorms coat the landscape with a veil of dust impairing Puerto Rico's air quality. For these drawings, Gallardo collected dust samples and had them examined at nanoscopic scale at Cornell University's Textiles Nanotechnology Laboratory. The digital images were then etched on paper with a laser cutter and drawn with colored pencil, resulting in ominous portraits of the air the nation breathes, with rock-size shapes floating against colorful backgrounds reminiscent of weather maps.

No devastation has impacted the lives of Puerto Ricans posthurricane more than *los muertos de María* (Maria's dead).<sup>10</sup> A number seared into the memory of all is 4,645, the count of those who died as a direct or indirect consequence of the

storm.<sup>11</sup> Never mind that the official death toll is sixty-four; mortality in Puerto Rico, especially the type that goes unaccounted for (or whose numbers are gaslit by the state), lays bare the necropolitical side of the colonial project. Scientific and investigative reporting in the aftermath of Maria found alarmingly increased deaths from accidents, cardiac conditions, and diabetes. Suicides saw an 18 percent uptick in cases in the nine months after the hurricane.<sup>12</sup> One such case appears in Gabriella N. Báez's *Ojalá nos encontremos en el mar* (*Hopefully, We'll Meet at Sea*, 2018– ; pages 68–71). When the artist received a cache of objects that used to belong to her father, who died by suicide two months before the first anniversary of Hurricane Maria, she began photographing them in an attempt to understand both his trauma and her own. The project also includes photographs of her and her father from family albums on which the artist has sewn red thread connecting both their eyes and hands. Fixing the bond between daughter and father in time and in perpetuity, the thread also speculates on the mental-health conditions that are passed down generation to generation. Despite this acknowledgment of mental-health issues, the project does not exonerate the state for its negligence toward a vulnerable sector of the population who were at a higher risk in the aftermath of an enormous disaster.

Grief can also leave a trace in the affective landscape of an entire nation. In Armig Santos's *Yellow Flowers* (2022, page 103) and *Procesión en Vieques III* (*Procession in Vieques III*, 2022; page 102), the painter revisits the memory of David Sanes Rodríguez, a civilian employed by the US Navy who was killed on the island of Vieques on April 19, 1999, after two practice bombs were inadvertently dropped near his observation post. His death was a watershed moment that would lead to the expulsion of the US Navy from Vieques in 2001, an important antecedent of the Verano del 19. Santos, who was a child when the events happened, paints from photographs of the procession that activists and other locals held to memorialize Sanes Rodríguez (fig. 6). The loose contouring of the figures and lack of identifiable traits suggest the faintness of the memories of those who were young in those tumultuous days. But it also leaves the scene open ended: the cyclical nature of these events dictates that the scene, in Santos's rendering, is not a procession for the one but for the many.

Like Santos, the Brooklyn-born painter Danielle De Jesus evokes points of contact between past and current events, sometimes literally overlapping them on the canvas. In *Google the Ponce Massacre* (2021, pages 78–79), De Jesus draws in the background a scene from the 1937 massacre that occurred in the town of Ponce when a peaceful protest turned violent after police opened fire and killed nineteen civilians (fig. 7). In the foreground, the artist paints two figures, one blue and one red, from a photograph she took during protests calling for the resignation of Ricardo Rosselló that took place in Manhattan's Union Square on July 19, 2019. Her friend, whose face is covered by a bandana, was treated aggressively by the police. The overlaying of these two moments painfully emphasizes the state's perpetual enforcement of violence against those who ask history to change its course.

No other symbol has galvanized the entire nation more than the black-and-white Puerto Rican flag (page 39, fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> Miguel Luciano makes direct use of this symbol of mourning and resistance in his sculptural installation *Shields/Escudos* (2020, pages 87–89). Responding to the closure of schools in recent years, Luciano created a work that reflects on the Puerto Rican context but also on any conservative measure that threatens access to education and free thinking in general. Made of sheet metal from decommissioned school buses, the ten sculptures that make up the installation have on their

back sides monochromatic Puerto Rican flags along with handles that would allow them to be used quite literally as shields, aimed at defending that same youth that the system failed. This drive toward solidarity also appears in Lulu Varona's embroidery *Mapa* (*Map*, 2020; page 114). Pairs of clasped hands mark the cardinal directions on this map where the occurrence of hurricanes is just a single event in a landscape of many others. The phrases stitched on the fabric's margins, including "El pueblo salva al pueblo" (The people save the people), point directly to a shared sense of abandonment and a reliance on one other as the only way to survive. Varona's reconstituted map opens up possibilities of wayfinding rooted in life experience held in common.

The monochrome flag has infiltrated artists' work in other ways, for example in a palette that can with similar means express the collective ethos of turning despair into defiance. Elle Pérez's video *Blackout* (2022), shot at night and without electric light except for occasional moments illuminated by the headlights of cars and a few lampposts, shows life during extensive island-wide power outages, which continued for months. While visiting their great-aunt in December 2017, Pérez shot in black-and-white the tediousness that fell after sunset as people had little to do but wait for the light of a new day. The second half of the video is a foil to the first, showing costumed young people dancing and drinking during the Festival de las Máscaras de Hatillo, held annually on December 28 (page 95). Torrential rains fell that day, causing the limited light to be abstracted and distorted by the water that landed on the lens, contributing to a feeling of disoriented bliss. The unadulterated joy of the mostly male crowd frolicking in the streets recalls Frances Negrón-Muntaner's concept of decolonial joy—a sense of jubilation that arises when the ruling colonial system feels, even if momentarily, irrelevant.<sup>14</sup>

After Maria, Puerto Ricans responded to a twenty-first-century catastrophe in twenty-first-century ways. Community building happened on the ground, with thousands rolling up their sleeves and sweating every inch of the nation's recovery. But it also took on a virtual dimension. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram became outlets to blow off steam with incisive yet humorous statements about living conditions. Memes passed among friends and families, usually on WhatsApp group chats. The humor found in them helped validate post-traumatic experiences. Memes were also a welcome presence amid the diet of digital news coming out in the aftermath of the storm, their local perspective offering candor and ingenuity in translating Puerto Ricans' stories into pithy commentaries. The Instagram account @tallergraficopr, belonging to designer and sculptor Garvin Sierra Vega, became an important megaphone, particularly during and after the Verano del 19. Sierra Vega's posts succinctly captured grievances toward the incompetence and neglect of local and federal governments (pages 104–5). The images, which begin in 2016, take up a vocabulary that borrows from the graphic-design tradition of the 1950s, famously the most recognizable art movement associated with Puerto Rico (fig. 8). Large swaths of solid color make up the background while one or a few images, also using a color-blocking technique, are digitally painted in the foreground. Inscribed with concise phrases, the images deliver biting messages. Sierra Vega's Instagram history also functions as an unofficial loudspeaker of Puerto Rico's current events, one that is highly effective in its immediacy and its economy of design.

Punctuating the run of *no existe un mundo poshuracán* is the performance-based work of Awilda Sterling-Duprey. An adaptation of the third chapter of her 2018 work *Lacks Criticality* (pages 108–9), her performance for the Whitney draws on the potency of Hurricane Maria and its impact on

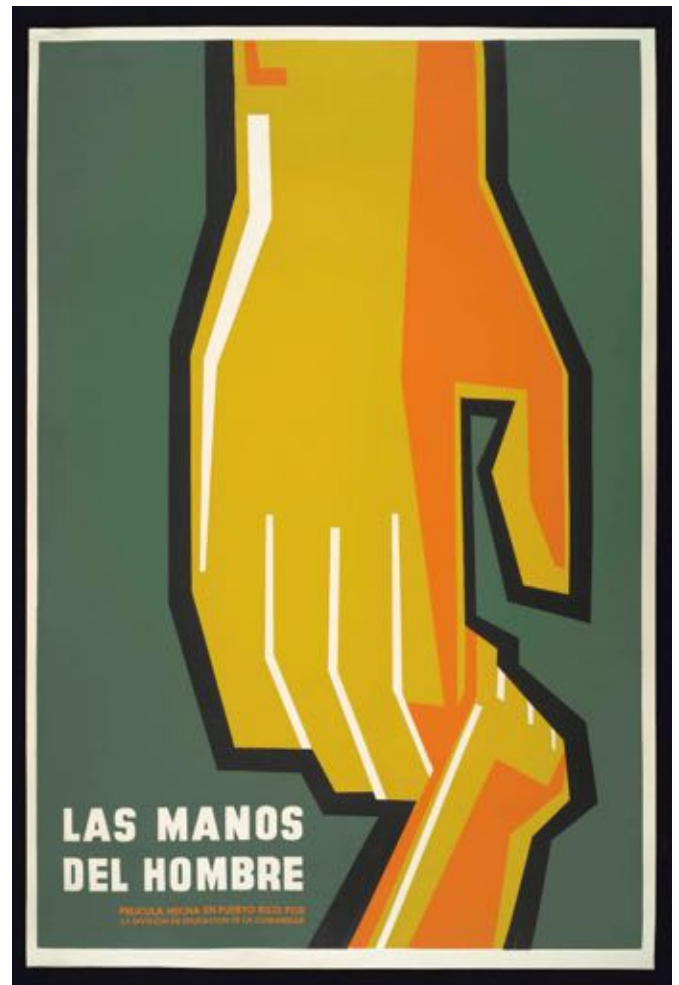


Fig. 8

José Meléndez Contreras, *Las manos del hombre* (*The Hands of Humanity*), 1951. Screenprint, 28  $\frac{3}{8}$  × 18  $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (72 × 48 cm). Colección de Carteles, Biblioteca Digital Puertorriqueña, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras

the physical and mental states of those who experienced it. Integrating Yoruba dance traditions such as the movements associated with Oyá—the orisha of wind, storms, and lightning—that remit back to the power of nature, the piece is structured around the improvisational choreography of a sole dancer, the artist herself. Illuminated by only a headlamp and a pair of flashlights, Sterling-Duprey's performance is a sightless vision of a disorienting combination of feelings—the terror that fell over Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, and the hope that sprang up soon after.

*Lucha y luto*, resistance and mourning, is a phrase whose echo pulsates implacably through *no existe un mundo poshuracán*. The wide variety of practices on display in the exhibition testifies to the critical mass of new approaches within the visual-art scene of Puerto Rico and its diaspora that insist on rejecting the conditions of coloniality while making the nation anew. The works of the twenty artists discussed here and who appear in the exhibition exist as permanent records in the material and affective archive that has come to and will continue to define Puerto Rico post-Maria. Like generations before them who also made art—and life—in the colony, these artists leave behind visual testimony of a nation that has survived its disappearance.

When so much of the present is a vestige of colonization, it is hard to picture a future for the archipelago that is not caught in the wake left by the events, both natural and political, that have mired it for centuries. *No existe un mundo poshuracán* proposes that imagining a new Puerto Rico is resolutely the purview of artists and that self-determination is a creative act.<sup>15</sup> Art can be the medium of a posthurricane, post-austerity, postearthquake, postpandemic world. This exhibition is a call to see the living and pay tribute to the dead.



## NOTES

- 1 Ana Teresa Toro (@altisidora), "Hay huracanes," Instagram, July 20, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0I92eCBW98/>; "Poet Ocean Vuong Sifts through the Aftershock of Grief in 'Time Is a Mother,'" interview by Tonya Mosley, *Fresh Air*, NPR, April 5, 2022, audio, 13:51, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/05/1090845515/poet-ocean-vuong-sifts-through-the-aftershock-of-grief-in-time-is-a-mother>.
- 2 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 3 Hilda Lloréns and Maritza Stanchich, "Water Is Life, but the Colony Is a Necropolis: Environmental Terrains of Struggle in Puerto Rico," *Cultural Dynamics* 31, nos. 1–2 (February–May 2019): 92.
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- 8 Yarimar Bonilla, "Postdisaster Futures: Hopeful Pessimism, Imperial Ruination, and *La futura cuir*," *Small Axe* 62 (vol. 24, no. 2) (July 2020): 157.
- 9 Debbie Leslie, *Holidays in the Danger Zone: Entanglements of War and Tourism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 150.
- 10 "La historia," Los muertos de María, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://losmuertosdemaria.com/>.
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- 13 On July 4, 2016, members of the collective Artistas Solidarixs y en Resistencia changed the traditional light blue and red of the Puerto Rican flag painted at La Puerta de la Bandera in Old San Juan, turning it black and white as a form of protest against the fiscal-control board. See Ana Gabriela Calderón, "Puerto Rico's Flag Is Black and in 'Mourning' over US-Imposed Oversight Board," *Global Voices*, July 17, 2016, <https://globalvoices.org/2016/07/17/puerto-ricos-flag-is-black-and-in-mourning-over-us-imposed-oversight-board/>.
- 14 Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "Decolonial Joy: Theorising from the Art of *Valor y Cambio*," in *Theorising Cultures of Equality*, ed. Suzanne Clisby, Mark Johnson, and Jimmy Turner (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2020), 171–94.
- 15 I am indebted to Sofía Gallisá Muriente's thinking, writing, and art practice, particularly her 2020 billboard project that consisted of the single question "¿Imaginamos la libertad?" (Do we imagine freedom?). This project crystallized for me the role artists have in shepherding the creative act of imagining a new Puerto Rico.