

Resisting Paradise

Curator: Marina Reyes Franco

Small Gallery



“This may be obvious to some, but it is important to remember that the use of paradise is neither ambivalent nor static even when it fixes the region outside time and space; paradise is always on some level signifying colonial, sexualized, racialized, and gendered space/object/desire.”
- Angelique V. Nixon¹

In June 2018, “**Discover Puerto Rico**” was announced as the name of the island’s new destination marketing organization and overseer of its tourism “product” and national “brand.” After 82 years, Puerto Rico was embracing the same slogan that marketers had used in the 1930s to promote the island, then under the direct colonial rule of the United States. Since Puerto Rico became a possession of the United States in 1898, fantasies of exoticism, abundance, and misery have coexisted with the States’ need to justify intervention. The year 1937 marked a departure from previous approaches to poverty and underdevelopment in Puerto Rico, which had focused on the economic problems of the locals. It was then that Governor Blanton Winship responded to Stateside backlash against his administration’s massacre of pro-independence civilians with a transformative advertising and propaganda campaign aimed at selling a pacified, glamorous island². Then, as in our debt-ridden, protest-heavy present, tourism was promoted by those in power as the only way up. Their message incorporated images of white-skinned, dark-haired women as an embodiment of Puerto Rico’s role as the exotic other under the United States flag; it equated products such as rum and coffee with the identity of the

islands, and presented the convenience of modern travel to a tropical setting that happened to be far from WWII’s geography of conflict³.

These marketing strategies have shifted very little in the intervening decades. Then, like now, we were in the midst of an economic depression, yet there was also a revolt against the creation of a resort-centered identity and its accompanying depiction of the island’s inhabitants as humble servants. Early on, Puerto Ricans understood it as a neo-colonial enterprise that would foster dependence on the United States. In her columns in *La Democracia*, journalist Ruby Black wrote about her contempt for Winship and compared him to author Sinclair Lewis’s fictional character George Babbitt, a man absorbed by “fishing, golf and tourism.” “Hunger, rum, death, blood,” she wrote; “Babbitt the tourist has us imprisoned in chains of trout, with walls of golf balls.”⁴ As the rumbles of independence spread through the region in the mid-20th century, the industry kicked into full gear, intertwining national identity with corporate branding. A similar fate befell nations throughout the Caribbean: the drive towards a version of development that is bent on accommodating foreigners becomes a historical trap, and what we prize about our islands is destroyed. Now these nations have to compete with each other for tourism dollars or else, defy interpretation.

Though geographically close, Caribbean artists are often unable to travel and show work within the region. Intra-regional exchange is challenged by variations in language and colonial history, while flight routes prioritize the convenience of visitors coming from the United States or Europe, mirroring the migration patterns of many post-colonial subjects. **Resisting Paradise** presents an opportunity to establish a much-needed regional dialogue. The exhibition features works by Deborah Anzinger, Leasho Johnson, and Joiri Minaya, showing how Caribbean artists are taking control of the narratives and images that convey us to others. Hailing from Jamaica and the Dominican Republic and its diasporas, the artists work at the intersections of tourism, sexuality, gender, environmental concerns, music, and the internet. Through their work, these artists reference shared histories of invasion, slavery, and economic exploitation of natural resources—forces which, in turn, translate into the commodification of Caribbean bodies in a Western imagining of paradisiacal tourist destinations. The show's title draws inspiration from a book by Bahamian writer Angelique V. Nixon, which discusses the perils of living in a crafted, imagined paradise, and the powerful ways in which cultural workers resist and transform those given narratives.

The shared Caribbean experience of the plantation-to-resort model of economic development makes evident the transition from slavery to a service economy under the **visitor-economy regime**. This term is used to denote economic activity generated by people who visit a given place and

that permeates all aspects of life, transforming a society into one that serves the tourist experience. *Resisting Paradise* explores what happens when tourism also applies to bodies—when sex and desire are also a currency. The projects of colonialism and empire have left an undeniable mark on Caribbean culture by shaping the way we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to nature itself. In their work, these artists envision new paradigms of life in the region and its diaspora by challenging preconceived notions of what it means to be Caribbean, that is a colonial, racialized, sexualized subject.

Deborah Anzinger's recent body of work aesthetically erodes understandings of land and bodies by using plants, styrofoam, mirrors, and synthetic afro-kinky hair to explore the intersectionality between race, gender, sexuality, ecology, and the environment. For Anzinger, the project of colonialism—the foundation of capitalism—has affected how people relate to each other and to the lands that they inhabit, and therefore these inherited understandings must be reshaped. Her pictorial approach in **Coy** is characterized by the use of sensually suggestive shapes and evocations of landscapes, in which various kinds of penetrations are happening. While some of her brush strokes resemble marks made by digital interventions, they are careful manual constructions revealing a worldview where the natural and artificial are equivalent. The mirrors she embeds in her paintings likewise offer a disruption of the subject/object binary by implicating the viewer in their reflection. Anzinger's abstractions—in referencing nature and the artist's own body—are a statement of their agency and potential.

Her video ***The Distraction of Symbolism*** delves deeper into her assertion that the plantation is the birthplace of our current economic regime—the place where both land and body were exploited—by placing her own pregnant self among images of rivers, plants, and sinkholes, while a dialogue addresses the issue of water shortages and lack of access to natural resources.

Leasho Johnson's monumental wall piece ***Death of the Soundboy*** digitally integrates and modifies scenes from a series of 19th century tropical landscape paintings and etchings by artists such as J.B. Kidd and William Clarke, whose picturesque works about the conditions of life, labour, and nature in the Caribbean were meant to convey pro-colonial messages to Europeans. These artists depicted black identity and Caribbean landscapes through the lens of the oppressor, creating works that were often misinterpreted as factual verification of how things were in the past, serving to manifest, preserve, and promote racist perspectives of history. Other source imagery is taken from paintings by Richard Ansdell and Marcel Antoine Verdier, whose depictions of enslaved people in the United States and Antigua, respectively, were meant to expose European audiences to the brutality of that system and their own complicity in it⁵. In his piece, Johnson digitally constructs an even more fantastical landscape by sampling fragments of the other artists' work in a digital collage, and drops his avatar into the mix as a figure of carnal resistance. The Soundboy in the work's title refers to the Jamaican term for disc jockeys, which emerged in the country's reggae/dancehall scene of the late 1970s.

Johnson has long referenced dancehall music and its influence on culture within his work. In the context of this piece, the invocation of the soundboy—a figure that metaphorically kills his opponents in battle—addresses otherness, violence, and the normalization of death in relation to blackness. In the mural, the avatar—a cross between a Dunny Doll, a blackface character, and the Venus of Willendorf—poses in daring, provocative ways that reclaim power over its own body and bring contemporary dancehall fearlessness into an otherwise oppressive scenario.

Joiri Minaya's works explore the objectification and interchangeability of women's bodies and landscape in visual culture, as well as patterns that provide camouflage and hypervisibility. Often, her works make a link between the pictorial representation of brown and black women from tropical geographies, and the way their bodies are still represented in contemporaneity as a continuation of the same foreign, male gaze. Minaya frequently incorporates contemporary "tropical" prints in her work, which reference the scientific drawings used to classify and facilitate the study of colonial, tropical possessions. The video ***Siboney*** documents the arduous process of Minaya painting a detailed mural in a museum featuring a tropical pattern inspired by a found piece of fabric. Throughout the process, the artist's own reflections on her actions appear as captions. The breathy, sensual version of the song "Siboney," as performed by Connie Francis, plays as Minaya pours water over her white dress and rubs herself against the painting, undoing it. The installation

#dominicanwomengooglesearch is the pixelated, printed result of searching for Dominican representation online. The work consists of several cut-out images of body parts, including some that are stylized with tropical-patterned fabrics, which are suspended from the ceiling. The fragments—many originating from websites where women offer their company to foreigners—lend themselves to individual study and make a point about the objectification of these bodies. When considered as a whole, however, the parts reconfigure themselves in strong, assertive stances that own the gaze that's laid upon them. In Minaya's photographs **Container #2** and **#3**, the artist poses in stereotypical fashion whilst wearing a full bodysuit printed with "tropical" designs that, in Glissantian fashion, renders her opaque to the viewer's gaze⁶. In Minaya's work, the women look back and hold the power to refuse themselves to the viewer.

Looking into and reflecting upon our Caribbean selves can be like trying to see yourself in an infinity mirror: our reflections are ever smaller, each reflection adding length to the path the light must travel before exiting the mirror, receding into infinity. This warped reflected self is akin to our idealized version as subjects in paradise, bought and sold to us over and over from colonial times to the present—something to aspire to, to shape our behaviour by. Seeing ourselves as how we think others perceive us and performing those identities back into the world can be a maddening experience. Learning the meaning of images in an increasingly mediated world is important; deconstructing the images that have informed how we present ourselves to the world is a political act.

A first iteration of the exhibition occurred in San Juan, Puerto Rico in June 2019 as an apexart *Open Call Exhibition* but the beginnings of the research involved in this exhibition occurred in Montreal in 2016 over two months in the Residency of the Americas at the Darling Foundry. It is fitting that its result should also be seen by its audience. While some might identify with the issues presented in the works, most will feel a return of the gaze usually laid on others, and will hopefully engage with a broader set of cultural actors and Othered immigrants from the Caribbean. In this new context, the pieces and subjects exert their right of refusal.

Marina Reyes Franco

Notes

1. Angelique V. Nixon, *Resisting Paradise. Tourism, Diaspora and Sexuality in Caribbean Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

2. The Ponce Massacre occurred on March 21, 1937 when police opened fire on a peaceful civilian march organized by the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party to commemorate the abolition of slavery and protest the incarceration of the party's leader, Pedro Albizu Campos. A federal investigation found Gov. Winship guilty, but neither he nor anyone in the police force was charged. M. Townsley, "Puerto Rico and Winship," *Steve Hannagan* (blog), May 10, 2018, accessed May 15, 2019, <http://stevehannagan.com/2018/05/10/puerto-rico-and-winship/>.

3. Dr. Hilda Blanch, "La imagen de Puerto Rico 1928-1941," July 22, 2018, in *La voz del Centro*, audio, 52:42, and "La propaganda de Puerto Rico en los Estados Unidos (1929-1941)," April 28, 2019, in *La voz del Centro*, audio, 51:30, accessed May 15, 2019, <http://www.vozdelcentro.org/tag/dra-hilda-blanch/>.

4. Dennis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 183.

5. The works referenced in the mural are: *The Hunted Slaves* (1861), an oil on canvas by Richard Ansdell; *Cocoa Nut walk on the Coast and Plantain Tree*, from the series of lithographs by J.B. Kidd published in *West Indian Scenery. Illustrations of Jamaica in a series of views* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1838-40); *Black slaves cutting sugar cane on a plantation established by the Delaps of Donegal* (1823), from *Ten views of the island of Antigua*, by William Clarke; and *Beating at Four Stakes in the Colonies* (1843), an oil on canvas by Marcel Antoine Verdier.

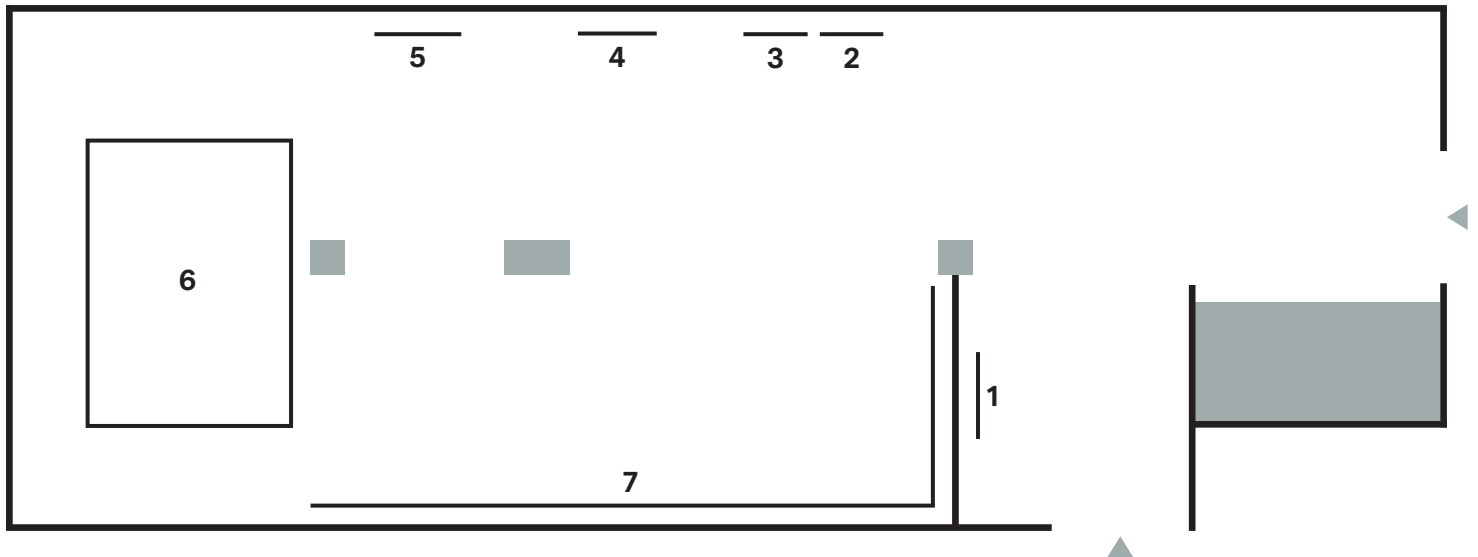
6. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-194.

Special thanks to the apexart and Darling Foundry teams, Pública, Cocina al Fondo, Naima Rodríguez, Natalia Viera, Michy Marxuach, La Esquina, Oswaldo Colón & Glenda Ortiz, Gache Franco, Oswaldo Colón Ortiz, Independent Curators International, Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, and their CPPC Travel Award, in particular María del Carmen Carrión, Kimberly Kitada, Renaud Proch, Holly Bynoe, Natalie Willis, and Nicole Smythe-Johnson for facilitating the research.

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1. Joiri Minaya, *Siboney*, 2014
Video, 10 min
2. Joiri Minaya, *Container #3*, 2016
Prepasted wallpaper (exhibition copy) / archival pigment print (original print)
40 x 60 in
3. Joiri Minaya, *Container #2*, 2016
Prepasted wallpaper (exhibition copy) / archival pigment print (original print)
40 x 60 in
4. Deborah Anzinger, *The Distraction of Symbolism*, 2019
Video, 7 min 02 sec
5. Deborah Anzinger, *Coy*, 2016
Acrylic paint, styrofoam, *Aloe Barbadosensis* and mirror on canvas, 72 x 54 in
6. Joiri Minaya, *#dominicanwomengooglesearch*, 2016
UV print on Sintra board and fabric collage, variable dimensions
7. Leasho Johnson, *Death of the Soundboy*, 2019
Wall piece (Bond paper on *faux-fini*), variable dimensions

Archipelago of the Invisibles

10-year anniversary of the Residency of the Americas

In the fall of 2019, the Darling Foundry celebrates Latin American art. To mark the ten-year anniversary of the Residency of the Americas, supported by the Conseil des arts de Montréal, the art centre is offering a special program to Montreal audiences that showcases the work of two former residents.

In the Main Hall, Chilean artist **Javier González Pesce** (2014 resident) presents his first solo exhibition in North America, *Two Ways to Disappear Without Losing the Physical Form*. The exhibition is curated by Darling Foundry curator Ji-Yoon Han.

In the Small Gallery, Puerto Rican curator **Marina Reyes Franco** (2016 resident) creates a dialogue between three Caribbean artists with the group exhibition *Resisting Paradise*: Deborah Anzinger (Jamaica), Leasho Johnson (Jamaica), and Joiri Minaya (Dominican Republic). *Resisting Paradise* is among the winning exhibitions of the *Open Call* program of apexart in New York and was presented in the summer of 2019 at :Pública cultural centre in San Juan (Porto Rico).

United under the title *Archipelago of the Invisibles*, the two exhibitions sketch the outline of **a community of islands**: the lost objects recovered from Santiago's rooftops and assembled by González Pesce in *The Island of the Unadapted* echo the connections woven between the Caribbean islands in the group exhibition, thus examining the

region's colonial history and the effects of mass tourism. The fragmented "tropical" bodies suspended in Joiri Minaya's *#dominicanwomengooglesearch* resonates with the oversized facial features that González Pesce sculpted, then placed in rowboats and let drift with the current. The themes of disappearance, camouflage, erasure, but also of excessive visibility run through both exhibitions, which make concrete the issues of memory and oblivion, identity, and how we view the other.

Throughout the fall, the centre will offer a series of **public programs** to encourage the participation of different audiences, particularly those from Montreal's Latin American cultural diversity (please ask the gallery attendant for more information).

Focused on visual artists and curators from Latin America, the **Residency of the Americas** is the first international residency program of the Conseil des arts de Montréal and the oldest running program at the Darling Foundry. Since 2008, twenty-three visual artists and curators from Brazil, the United States, Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Porto Rico, Salvador, Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Canada have resided in the Darling Foundry's heritage studio building in Montreal.