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INTERVIEW / ENTREVISTA

Art as History in The Barrio, in Puerto Rico and Beyond: Interview with Diógenes Ballester

CARLOS RIVERA SANTANA AND CLAUDIA DÍAZ

The first time I met Puerto Rican artist and arteologist Diógenes Ballester was in a community summit in el Barrio. As a researcher interested in Puerto Rican art as history—as opposed to art history—I was introduced to Diógenes, one of the few artists who can navigate the art of the diaspora and in Puerto Rico given his long trajectory as an artist in both Puerto Rico and el Barrio. Diógenes is eager to share his extensive and precise knowledge of the history of art and how it intersects with the socio-political realities of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans; for Claudia and me, it's shocking how Diógenes recites dozens of facts—names, places, years, and so on—with near-impeccable precision. His personal story, like his art, is profoundly influenced by the political history of Puerto Rico and the art history of the world. Yet, Diógenes has a different sto-

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Alí Francis García, Local207 Studios ©2018

La Casa de Arte y Cultura de la Playa de Ponce. Photograph courtesy of the author.

ry to tell, in that he complicates Puerto Rican art history starting from artists in the diaspora, as opposed to commencing in Puerto Rico. Additionally, his aesthetic influences in Puerto Rico are described not starting from San Juan (where Puerto Rican art history is usually focused), but in his hometown of Ponce, where he lives part of the year and has a community-based project, “*La Casa de Arte y Cultura de la Playa de Ponce*” [The House of Art and Culture of the Ponce’s Beachfront], funded mostly by his artwork.

Claudia and I arrive at Diógenes’ art studio in El Barrio, in which he has worked more than thirty years; it is an East Harlem apartment surrounded by his work. As is customary when you arrive at any Puerto Rican house, he generously receives us with food and drink. Similarly, it is customary to help ourselves to this near-banquet; it is not an option to refuse the delicious food. He makes a comment encouraging us to taste the bread, which is comparable to the quality found in Paris—Diógenes has been also traveling to work in Paris for some years now.

Carlos Rivera Santana (CRS): Thanks for your warm hospitality, Diógenes, and agreeing to do this interview. You are one of the few Puerto Rican artists who

significantly transits between the art scene in Puerto Rico and the art scene of the Puerto Rican diaspora, and their—sometimes—divergent art histories. You are an internationally renowned artist who spends time producing work in Ponce, Paris and New York. You were already an established artist in Puerto Rico and Director of the Miguel Pou Visual Art School... so please tell us about how you ended up in El Barrio.

Diógenes Ballester (DB): Well, this is an unusual story. It all started when I was in Puerto Rico, many artists would go overseas, mainly to New York, and get their masters or MFA from places like Pratt Institute.

CRS: Around what year are we talking about?

DB: That was in 1974, in Ponce. I remember around that time a few artists who returned to the Island were Andrés Rodríguez Santos, Humberto Figueroa (who is a curator now), and Frank Pérez, who returned with a Masters in Art Education. A few of us, in Ponce had begun the art collective El Alballarde, and my art installation *Mundo Muerto* [Dead World] was being exhibited, specifically in 1975. It was a great time to be an artist in Ponce, but I wanted to experience the international art scene myself, first hand.

CRS: Did you leave around that time to New York?

DB: Not really. I arrived in New York in 1981. But the experience of artists in our collective who had come back from New York and other cities already had an influential impact in my art in the Seventies. I somewhat knew what to expect when I got there. I was lucky. When I bought my airline ticket to New York, I travelled with one suitcase and my art portfolio with some of my work from Puerto Rico (PR).

I remember that the day before I left PR, I met up with a good friend, Don David Flores. And he told me, “Diógenes, what are we going to do this year with the school [Miguel Pou Visual Art School].” And I replied: “No... the thing is that I resigned, I am leaving.” [Don David then said:] “You are leaving!? Why?” Then I replied: “Don David, for me it is ridiculous to talk to students about a history of art that I have never fully experienced, that I have only read about in books.” That is... the main motivation why I migrated to New York: to experience art—an adventure mainly motivated to experience the arts here. I was feeling too uncomfortable talking about something I did not really understand, in terms of understanding it via the experience of seeing it and living it. My body and mind required this level

of understanding. Then Don David said, “I am going to help you. Tonight, bring four dollars in quarters, and we are going to call my son in New York.” That night, I brought the four dollars in coins, and we called Don David’s son. I thought he lived somewhere central in Manhattan, but his son said, “Nah, brother, you will be staying in the heart of El Barrio.” I thought this was a little strange, to say the least. Don David told me to dress as Puerto Rican as I could, and to bring a sign with my name on my art portfolio.

I remember that my family said, “Wow, he is actually leaving. But why?” My mom from the balcony of her house put a Virgin of the Miracles rosary (*rosario*) over my head. My dad gave me a white *guayabera*. My brother took me to the Luis Muñoz Marín airport, because back then the airport in Ponce was not international. I arrived in New York, and Frankie Flores, Don David’s son, says, “Muchacho, the only one with a *jíbaro* face in this airport is you, you don’t need this sign” [we all laugh].

Frankie Flores showed me Harlem, as we drove and talked. Then we arrived at 111th street between Lexington and Third Avenue, where I would be staying. On the other side of the street there was a *friquitín*, you know a place that sells fried food (*frituras*), *cuchifrito*, as they call it here. I saw a lady, who, we learned as the situation unfolded, was very mad because her husband was unfaithful. The husband was holding a chair, defending himself against the knife (*un puñal*) that his wife was threatening to stab him with. People were screaming and just watching the fight. I turned to Frankie, and he said, “Don’t worry, this happens all the time here.”

After that scene, we arrived at Frankie’s house, and Doña Carmen—she is no longer with us—tells me, as opposed to asking, “You haven’t eaten.” She stands up and says, “There is eggplant with codfish and white rice,” and I replied, “¡Ave María!” I couldn’t be happier. After we eat, Frankie tells me, “Now, we are going to walk in the heart of El Barrio, but you have to take off that *guayabera* because they are going to think that you are an undercover cop, not one of us [*un encubierto*]. I took off the *guayabera* and I put on a t-shirt. From the very moment that we started walking through El Barrio, I started to understand the art history of the Puerto Rican diaspora.

Around the corner close to 104th street and Lexington Avenue, we arrived at a little park. There was Jorge Soto, Gilberto Hernández, Fernando Salicrup, artists of the diaspora, and poet Roberto Ortiz Melendez and many

more people: a whole group of artists drawing in their notebooks and writing. It was a quotidian activity there. Jorge was drafting a mural on a wall at the back of the park. I thought to myself: "Here, the artists work all together. There is a genuine sense of community here, but they all speak English, and I only wished I could understand them." Still, all the artists received me with great warmth and respect. Then, Salicrup took me and Frankie to his house, where there was another gathering of all types of artists. That is how my artistic chapter in El Barrio started, and I knew everything from then on would change me, in many ways.

CRS: When you arrived to El Barrio you were already an artist and a teacher of art and art history in Ponce. Then you started to learn and become part of the continued development of the Puerto Rican art history in El Barrio and in the diaspora at large. You have taught courses, delivered keynotes, and written papers for prestigious art institutions and conferences, among other academic activities. Many artists consider you a teacher among artists, emerging artists and your contemporaries alike. If you would put all that knowledge into paper or even into a course, what would it look like? What would a Puerto Rican Diaspora Art History class look like, taught by an artist with your trajectory and of your caliber?

I am not cut out to be a university professor.

DB: Yes, in the United States I actually did teach at the State University of New York at Albany, from 1986 to 1987 and at other universities and art institutes; however, I quickly realized that I am first and foremost an artist. I am not cut out to be a university professor. However, this idea of a Puerto Rican Diaspora Art History course is something that I would be very interested in exploring, and I would suggest it would be different from a Puerto Rican Art History course. I would conceptualize it as a History of Puerto Rican Artists of the Diaspora course. It would be a big undertaking best accomplished by groups working together. Courses on the history of Puerto Rican Artists of the Diaspora could be presented as a series of research seminars, each focused on investigating and evaluating the art and aesthetics devel-

oped by the Puerto Rican Artists of the Diaspora from different historical periods, starting from the nineteenth century to the present. The research work would address individual and groups of artists; artistic, philosophical, cultural and political movements; and locations of the diaspora and other categorizations that emerged. The objective would be to utilize the classes as collective research teams. The focus of the various classes would be on the aesthetic approach and common and divergent narratives of the art work produced by Puerto Rican Artists of the Diaspora. A broader goal would be the transmission of this history to future generations.

These seminars would also look at the connection of Puerto Rican Art of the Diaspora to different trends in Puerto Rican art and the international art establishment such as realism, romanticism, impressionism, expressionism, primitivism, deconstructivism, conceptualism, new media and post-conceptual art movements. This would include the contribution of our painters, printmakers, sculptures, conceptual artist, photographers, filmmakers, muralists, graffiti artists, new media artists and post-conceptual artists who have worked on the periphery of the established mainstream art world. Of import would be acknowledgement of the influence of the Afro-descendant diaspora, as we begin to look at the Caribbean and beyond.

In establishing the timelines to be covered by these seminars, the definition of the philosophical terms of the “Aesthetic” and “Diaspora” should be addressed. This will afford a frame from which to undertake the work, including, first, How do we identify Puerto Rican artists who were born in Puerto Rico and moved from the Island to undertake their art production in various places?; second, How do we classify artists born in the United States or other countries from Puerto Rican descent, and how many generations can this encompass?; and third, How do we give special attention on the development of the Puerto Rican artistic movements in New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago as well as the new centers of the diaspora in Florida and Texas? These concepts and many others need to be formulated to understand the spectrum and value of our artistic legacy.

I would actually start the seminars with analyses of the Puerto Rican Art in the Diaspora with nineteenth-century Puerto Rican artists in Europe and early twentieth-century Puerto Rican artist in the United States. The next period might be the early Twentieth Century up to World War II. Then

World War II and the immigration in the Forties might constitute another period. This would be followed by the artists of the Diaspora in the Fifties and Sixties. The sons and daughters of the Diaspora from the Forties, along with groupings from the Eighties, Nineties and the first two decades of the twenty-first century would have to be determined.

Some highlights that come to mind that I would emphasize, because we tend to forget, are that Francisco Oller Cestero studied with Gustave Courbet in 1861 and was the link for many artists in Puerto Rico with the impressionist movement. Oller was friends with most of the artists of this movement in Europe and also made friends with their major supporter, Dr. Gachet. Oller connected France with Puerto Rico while he was living and working in Paris, and then connected Puerto Rico with Paris while he was living and working in San Juan.

The connection between Puerto Rico and New York City was made through another Puerto Rican Artist in the Diaspora, Miguel Pou, at the beginning of the 20th century. Again we tend to not consider this fact. Miguel Pou produced his paintings in Ponce and then traveled in 1919 to study at the Art Student League in New York City and later in 1935 at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. This was one of the first formal art connections between New York City and Puerto Rico.

Another very important point is that during World War II many Puerto Rican artists joined or were drafted into the United States Army, and were very influenced by their experiences in Europe and elsewhere. Some then took advantage of studying arts formally after the war with the educational benefits that they earned. Epifanio Irizarry was one of those artists who, in addition to studying with Miguel Pou, was influenced by the expressionism movement in Germany while in the service during the war. When he returned to Puerto Rico, he joined the artists of the Fifties generation in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and later established his workshop on the eastern side of the Abolition Slavery Park in Ponce. I remember that I would walk by his studio and linger at the door to see his art and process. Another example is Lorenzo Homar, who was born in Puerto Rico but came to live in New York at an early age and then entered the American armed forces during World War II. Once the war ended, Homar returned to New York City and enrolled at the School of the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1946. While there, he was able to meet and learn from artists such as Ben Shahn, Rufino Tamayo and

Gabor Peterdi. Homar returned to Puerto Rico in 1950, where along with other artists, such as Rafael Tufiño, Félix Rodríguez Báez, Julio Rosado del Valle and René Marqués, he co-founded the Puerto Rican Art Center (CAP). Later he was named director of the Graphics Studio of the Division of Graphic Art of the Department of Community Education of Puerto Rico (DIVEDCO), which had been created as part of a government campaign to teach public health. This is when Homar created most of his works of art.

Rafael Tufiño, who was born in Brooklyn, New York, also joined the armed forces for the Second World War. Later, he moved to Mexico to study painting and printmaking at the Academia de San Carlos, where he was exposed to populist ideas of the Workshop of Popular Graphics (Taller de Gráfica Popular) and Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. Upon returning to Puerto Rico, he was one of the founders of CAP and then joined the Graphic Arts Workshop of the Division of Community Education (DIVEDCO). He then returned to New York City and was part of a group of artists Friends of Puerto Rico and later moved to El Taller Boricua, founded by Marcos Dimas, Armando Soto, Adrian Garcia and Neco Otero.

As you can see, there was a flow of Puerto Rican artists between Puerto Rico and New York City before and after World War II that was very important for the development of Puerto Rican arts in both places. This movement of artists influenced the ideas and art that emerged in the Puerto Rican Artists of the Diaspora in the Sixties and particularly the Seventies in New York City. Because there was a bi-directional flow and complementary exchange, I think it's very important to study the relationships between the Fifties generation of the Puerto Rican Art Center (CPA), the Division of Community Education (DIVEDCO), and the Graphic Arts Workshop of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP) in Puerto Rico and the Friends of Puerto Rico and Taller Boricua and other institutions in the United States during this period.

It is also important to remark that while many artists of the Diaspora during this period worked in collectives, others like Rafael Ferrer, Domingo Garcia, Carlos Irizarry, Carlos Raquel Rivera, Rafael Montañez Ortiz worked independently. I remember that Rafael Montañez Ortiz who pushed the aesthetic of the Puerto Rican in the Diaspora forward while studying at Pratt, used to discard bed mattresses at Brighton Beach in Coney Island and leave them there for months. Later he used them as found-objects in his artistic work. Some of his pieces are in the

Collection of the Modern Art Museum (MoMA). There are many oral history stories like that one, which is why this course needs to be developed and researched by a collective. The research needs to include oral histories and interviews, and a seminar situation would fit the needs of the endeavor well.

The research needs to include oral histories and interviews, and a seminar situation would fit the needs of the endeavor well.

Overall, I will mention a list of Puerto Rican artists I would include in the History of the Art from the Diaspora (but note this group is far from exhaustive): Francisco Oller Cestero, Miguel Pou, Lorenzo Homar, Rafael Tufiño, Carlos Osorio, Adrian Nelson Rámirez , Olga Albizu, Myrna Baez, María E. Somosa, Julio Micheli, Marcos Dimas, Neco Otero, Tony Bechara, José Morales, Andrés Rodríguez Santos, Carlos Sueños, Adrián García, Armando Soto, Jorge Soto, Fernando Salicrup, Marina Gutierrez, Miriam Hernandez, Elein Soto, Nitza Tufiño, Diógenes Ballester, Jorge Luis Rodríguez, Manuel Vega, Papo Colo, Nestor Otero, Rafael Colón Morales, Juan Sánchez, Pepón Osorio, Angel Rodríguez, Nicholasa Mohr, Candida Alvarez, Jean Sebastian Basquiat, Arnaldo Morales, Luis Stephenberg, José Andreu, Miguel Luciano, Hiram Maristani, Adrián Viajero, Martin Rivera García, Rafael Rivera Rosa, Humberto Figueroa, Antonio Martorell, Julio Rosado del Valle, José Rodríguez, Denis Mario, Toni Vazquez, Maximo Colón, Roger Caban, Tania Torres, Pedro Pietri, Maritza Davila, Tere Marichal, Sofia Madonado, Gloria Calero, Evelin Collazo, Heriberto Nieves, Eduardo Lalo, Alfonso Arana, Marisel Tavarez, Marta García, Daniel Lind Ramos, Carlos Santiago, Ivan Moura, Miguel Conesa, Sandra Steves, Gladys Nieves, Jonny Betancourt, Charly Biasinni, Jorge Morales Zeno, Carlos Sueños, Arnaldo Roche and many, many others could be included or made available as research subjects for a course.

CRS: Wow, sounds like a really exhaustive course to me. At the same time, I would love to take it! It is fascinating the way you have approached Puerto Rican Art History given that it is not the type of Puerto Rico Art History that would be taught in universities in PR or the Puerto Rican art history that

might be taught—though it isn't—in universities in the United States or even elsewhere, say in the Caribbean or Latin America. In the U.S., a Puerto Rican art history might start with artists established in the U.S. such as Tufiño, Dimas and yourself, but you are mentioning artists such as Oller, who lived in France, or others who developed their art in places in Europe or in the places where they were deployed because of U.S. war conflicts.

You also mention Basquiat, who is often considered an African-American artist and therefore belonging to that art tradition, when in fact he was Haitian and Puerto Rican. Indeed, his mother (the Puerto Rican side) introduced and encouraged Basquiat to become established in the arts. Similarly, while a Puerto Rico art history class would usually emphasize artists in the tradition of the city of San Juan, you are a product of the tradition of art in Ponce, with Miguel Pou Visual Art School and the Ponce Museum of Art being the most recognizable centers of that artistic tradition. So, it seems that your artistic stance transgresses nationalistic borders, and your focus is not necessarily located in the centers of the art market. You state that your work examines trans-Caribbean and transnational history, and you as an artist and arteologist spend time between El Barrio, Ponce, and Paris. Can you elaborate how this trans-Caribbean and transnational approach influences your work and how you see it having influences in the art history of Puerto Rican diaspora artists? Also, please tells us how it influences your unique idea of the arteologist.

DB: I will start with the concept of arteology. Arteology, for me, is to see things in an historical context, not an historical vacuum. Everything has a history, and it's the starting point of the arteologist. Therefore, history becomes an important artefact to use for my work. However, when dealing with art for profit or the market of art, the emphasis is on the quantity of products for the needs of the art market. I prefer to emphasize meaning. To make sure my work does not fall into the capitalist trap, I consider three things. First, I always go to the past to inform and aesthetically transform the present and the future. Second, I create an art for now that is informed by the past while also looking to the future. Third, I ask the question: What can I create that transcends and transforms the present? In other words, for me, art is a form of reflection and meditation that rethinks issues. The arteologist finds historical pieces and consciously transforms them, to create a philosophy for understanding the present and the future.

Any artist, in the process of creating art, is also a student and scholar of art, history and philosophy. An artist who takes this multiplicity of roles seriously might be called an “arteologist.” In this process, the arteologist is like an egregor or a griot, helping to ferment and mature the connections that in contemporary art are linked to cultural identity, historical meaning and spiritual transformation.

My work became more trans-Caribbean and transnational when I began to put into visual and written practice an “owning of history” approach that crafted ideas that had been fermented in Wisconsin, where I began to produce work generated from my Puerto Rican Spiritism experiences. This was the beginning of an ongoing exploration of ideas of globalization, immigration and the interaction between cultures in metropolises such as New York City. This work was enhanced by living and working in Paris for two years, 1999-2000, where I witnessed the interchanges between French nationals and immigrants from the ex-colonies; where I was exposed to the transnational world; and where I solidified developing ideas of global interchanges between cultures. In addition, the death of my father in 1999 affirmed my spirituality and commitment to my own ancestral roots. These

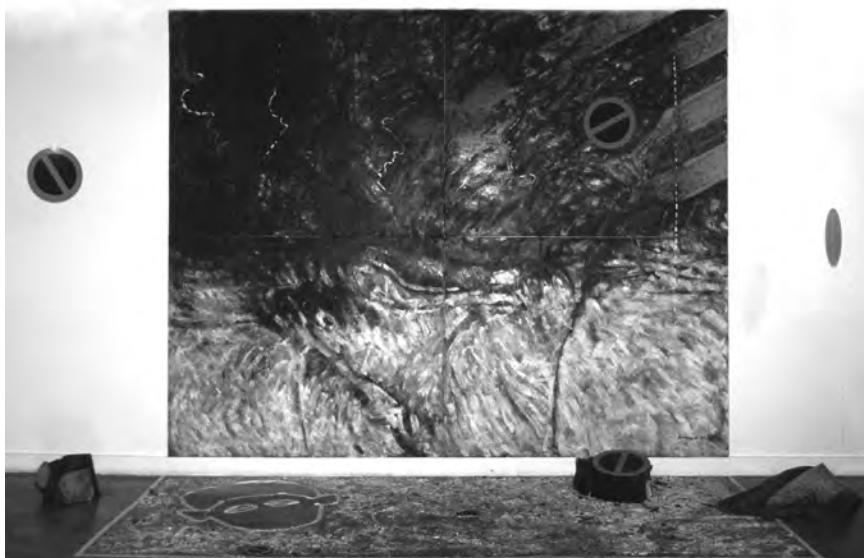


Globalization, Post-industrialism and Syncretism, 1999. © Diógenes Ballester.

experiences and ideas began to manifest in my artistic expressions of syncretic altar installations. Over the ensuing years, my work progressively transformed into a more trans-Caribbean and then more trans-national approaches, specifically in the symbols and discourse I used.

I think we have reached the part of the interview that I need to demonstrate my points through my art, so let's just use art as a way to answer your questions and keep the conversation going. During my Paris residency, I had the opportunity to participate in several international exhibits that helped me to articulate my artistic vision. These included the following: 1) *Globalization, Post-industrialism and Syncretism*, at the Multicultural Forum of Contemporary Art at the Port-au-Prince National Museum of Haiti, 1999; and at La Casa de Las Americas in Havana, Cuba for Symposium Myth in the Caribbean, 2000; 2) Earth Energy, Space Confluence, Paris, 2000; and 3) Gathering Energy, 1999, at 1001 Reasons to Love the Earth, World Art Collection of Foundation 2000, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

In the exhibition entitled *Globalization, Post-industrialism and Syncretism*, I combined the portrait of my father and the African immigrant



Earth Energy, 2000. © Diógenes Ballester.



Gathering Energy, 1999. © Diógenes Ballester.

Madamas I encountered on the streets in Paris. In Haiti I completed the installation with the use of charcoal, made from cutting down trees and deforesting the country in order to have fuel. It is one of my earlier attempts to syncretize these stories manifesting in the trans-Caribbean world that was unfolding around me. In *Earth Energy*, I address the devastation from a powerful storm that swept over France. In hindsight, that experience forecast much of the global destruction we have increasingly seen due to global warming. In *Gathering Energy* (1999), I symbolize in the head of a figure awareness of the imbalance of energy globally and begin to look at the global effects of this imbalance.

This transnational perspective was enhanced by participating in and winning a prize at the Taipei Biennial, 2001; curating exhibit *Intersecting Circles* in Krakow, 2004; and being invited as a guest of honor to the Second Guanlan International Biennial and also staying as an artist in residence in China in 2009. I also had the opportunity to further articulate these transnational ideas when I co-authored with, Dr. Mary Boncher, a piece on the syncretic aspects of Puerto Rican spiritism in my work, which we presented in 2006 at the Latin American Scholars Association Conference in San Juan; and when I presented a paper entitled “Graphic Language in The Development of Individual and Collective Latino Identity” at a conference on U.S. Latino Printmaking in the 21st Century, in Austin, in November 2008.

So I think the trans-Caribbean and transnational features of my work, and what they address, reflect the experiences that were afforded by the opportunities to live and travel in other countries; and what I encountered about the metropolises of post-colonial ruling countries and previous colonial subjects who had immigrated to those metropolises. The similarity of stories with mine were being manifested in those global spaces, as were the common underpinnings of cultural meaning brought by the immigrants to their new homes, the increasing globalization of commodity production/consumptions and the extraction of wealth from peoples in the service of a few, as well as my own spiritual foundation. These are the narratives embedded in my work.

CRS: So, clearly there is a discussion of national and transnational cultural identities in your work, themes that many other Puerto Rican contemporary artists. For instance, Juan Sánchez or Miriam Hernández use cultural identity discourse in their works to confront the complex political aspects of the colonial status of Puerto Rico and beyond. Some Puerto Rican artists consider their work and themselves as explicitly engaging in political activism, and others make a nuanced distinction by calling themselves artists beyond all and that their art can be mostly political but that they are not activists. How do you see your work discussing politics, colonialism and history--issues that are relevant to any Puerto Rican? It is clear that your work draws from a transnational approach that privileges histories imbued with colonialism, such as the islands in the Caribbean. Assuming that these histories call for an end of colonization, how your work addresses colonization, or becomes anti-colonial or decolonial?



Ancestral Manifestation, 2006. © Diógenes Ballester.



The Abolition of Slavery Park sculpture. © Diógenes Ballester.



Registry of Slaves from the Village of Ponce from 1852. © Diógenes Ballester.



At the entrance of the Exhibit was built a Church like confessional.

I have increasingly embraced cultural and spiritual identity as two domains of resistance and, as such, are an arm of the political de-colonial and anti-capitalist globalization movement.



Spirit of the Slaves, 2007-2008. © Diógenes Ballester.

DB: The paintings, some of which I mentioned earlier, that I produced during the Eighties had more overt political themes about the struggle against colonialism, racism, social alienation and immigration. We, the transnational community, have moved toward increased globalization of the capitalist system, in which commodity production and consumption in the service of profit for a few is the ever-increasing determination of mode of being. This is a problem that requires continued reflection and action. I have increasingly embraced cultural and spiritual identity as two domains of resistance and, as such, are an arm of the political de-colonial and anti-capitalist globalization movement. The exploration of cultural and spiritual history that bridges us to our ancestral past--our colonial past--reaffirms our identity, and anchors us to our collective future.

This is embedded in my work.

Let me continue the conversation, focused on how my art can answer your questions. *Ancestral Manifestation*, 2006, an installation piece created for the exhibition *Ancestral Confessions: Historical Evidence of a City* at the Museum of the History of Ponce, consists of a sculpture of a slave standing



Spirit of the Slaves, 2007–2008, detail. © Diógenes Ballester.

powerful and free. His chains of bondage lie broken at his feet. He holds in his hands a ship, a slave ship, upon which the African influence and culture were transmitted to Puerto Rico and the rest of the Caribbean. I created the sculpture in response and as a reinterpretation of the well-known sculpture of a freed slave in the Abolition of Slavery Park of Ponce that commemorates the end of slavery in Puerto Rico (1873). The Abolition of Slavery Park sculpture is kneeling in a thankful but subservient positioning. This positioning always bothered me as a young man growing up in Ponce, and I wanted to

create a depiction of our powerful and culturally supportive African heritage. Included in the installation are bags used at the time to transport coffee from the mountains to the Port of Ponce, and from there to the world. My father was a dock worker and carried many coffee bags on his back as he loaded ships as a proud and free Black man.

Also, included in the Museum of the History of Ponce Exhibit was the “Registry of Slaves from the Village of Ponce” from 1852, which was loaned for exhibition by the Ponce Historical Archives. The Registry is a listening of slaves with objectified and subjugated physical descriptions of these individuals. At the entrance of the Exhibit was built a Church like confessional in which the audience was invited to reflect on their histories in the context of slavery.

Encounter, Mythology and Reality was presented at the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico in 2008. It included a painting and new media installation entitled *Spirit of the Slaves*, 2007-08, that consists of a large painting depicting my visual reaction to the Registry of Slaves from the Village of Ponce, 1852. I copied pages from the Registry onto a web page displayed on a computer screen hung on the wall next to the painting. The audience was invited to respond to the Registry with their own stories on a computer positioned in front of the painting. There was a flat screen called the Free Registry embedded in the painting that displayed a blog with these written thoughts, reactions, and/or interpretations to the Registry of Slaves by the audience (both those who attend the exhibition and online website contributors).

Spirit of the Slaves, 2007-08, encompasses and transcends the notion of slavery entailed in the physical descriptions of the slaves in Ponce written in the mid-19th century. While the Registry clearly asserts the objectification and subjugation of a people, the very existence of the “Registry” also affirms the African presence in Puerto Rico and their contribution to the culture of Puerto Rico. Presenting the pages of the Registry through a web broadcast allowed the audience to read and react to the included materials.

By reacting the historical realities of colonization, such as slavery, my work tries to elicit a conversation that puts colonized peoples at the center and in the protagonist position to transform that history into one that is more just and true to its past.

CRS: You keep producing work in your studios in El Barrio, Ponce and Paris, in particular in Ponce you have a community art education project and house in



Memory of Nature the Rhythm of Life, 2016 -2017, *installation view*.

La Playa, a historic barrio in this city where you are originally from. It sounds like your anti-colonial and political view at large transcends your art. You are funding this project yourself, and it's anchored in art education as a means of community intervention. So you are very interested in the future of Puerto Rico, even more so after Hurricane María, and you are putting art as a wager in support of the future of that community. Where is your work heading, and where do you see the future of contemporary Puerto Rican art?

DB: I think I can only talk from my work as a contemporary artist. As we move into the uncertain future of the twenty-first century as Puerto Ricans on the Island and as part of the Diaspora, but, perhaps most important, as members of the human race, we are faced with an ever increasingly de-



Manifestation. © Diógenes Ballester.

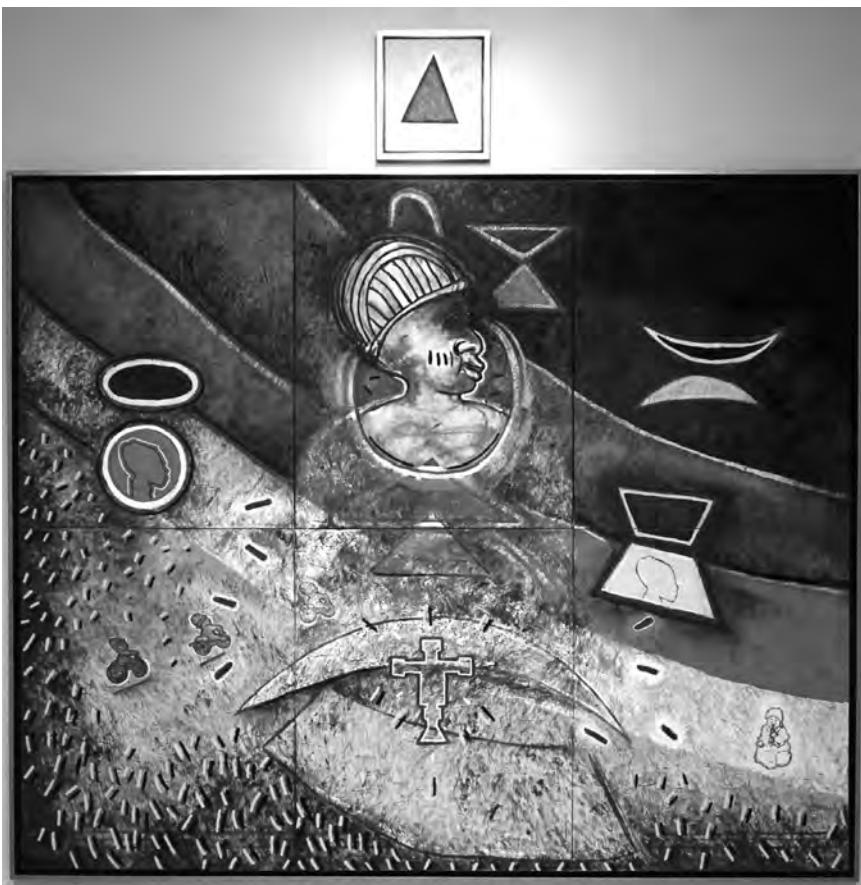
structive globalized capitalist system, the intensified exploitation of the vast majority of people in the service of a few, the short-sighted ongoing degradation of the earth, water, air and life forces needed to sustain us. I see my work continuing along the path of being an arteologist. Quite truthfully, we are in trouble, as is our planet, or we are in trouble mainly because our planet is in trouble because of us. While the answers to the future cannot totally be found in the past, I believe that we must look to the past and the meaning passed down from our ancestors if we are to create a viable future for the human race that is built on respect and harmony, because simply what we are doing is not working. In this process, each culture has much to offer. My hope is that as we find and focus on the commonality of



Vayú Respirando, 2013. © Diógenes Ballester.

meaning that has sustained our various cultures, we will find the basis to work together with collectivized goals. This is my work as an arteologist and the focus of my current work.

This is, in part, why as an arteologist I aim to draw connections between my art and my own communities. This is why I started La Casa de Arte y Cultura de la Playa de Ponce. In unearthing my own history I must go back to my historical roots where my art emerged in the first place, and transform it by giving back what the community of La Playa gave me, the inspiration to make art. The history of La Playa is very rich, so much so that one of the first photo oral history projects was done there by Manolo Ramírez. The Ponce Massacre happened not so far from this community,



Akashic Archives, 2014. © Diógenes Ballester.

one of the survivors being my grandfather. Don Pedro Albizu Campos was from Ponce and his family lived there; we all knew them. The Ponce Art Museum was one of the cultural hubs of the town and of the area outside of San Juan. Even more important, *vejigante* festivals in Ponce are said to have started in La Playa. It was in that community right next to the Caribbean Sea that I articulated my first artistic ideas, and that community became my first art studio and workshop. The connection between folklore, history, community and nature will be themes that will continue to feature in my artistic work and in my community work in Ponce.



Taíno Thought, 2016. © Diógenes Ballester.

My work, for instance *Memory of Nature: the Rhythm of Life* (2016-17), displayed at the Museo de Arte de Ponce, is an example of the kind of artwork that echoes my quest for affirmation of a positive direction or vision of who we can become spiritually, historically, technological and culturally. The exhibit embodies stories and wisdom passed down from my Afro-Caribbean roots integrated with the wisdom of the *Tattva*.

Tattva is a Sanskrit word meaning vibration of energy, representative of a belief system with origins as far back as 2000 BC, which uses geometric symbols with specific colors to describe the elements of ether, air, fire, earth and water. The energy vibration of these elements is seen as embodied



Point of Origin, 2010. © Diógenes Ballester.

in the universal cycle of life on earth, and its manifestation changes every twenty-four minutes as the sun moves from one position to the next over the course of the day. The five tattvas are: 1) *Akash* (center), the ether element, symbolized by a black or indigo blue oval, which incorporates all of the other tattwas; 2) *Vayu* (north), the air element, symbolized by a turquoise circle, which represents unity; 3) *Tejas* (south), the fire element, symbolized by a red triangle, which represents energy, electricity, perception; 4) *Prithvi* (east), the earth element, symbolized by a yellow square, which represents realization; and 5) *Apas* (west), the water element, symbolized by the white crescent moon, which represents emotions and magnetism.

By combining the concepts and symbols of Afro-Caribbean history with that of the tattwa in *Memory of Nature: the Rhythm of Life*, I am attempting to artistically depict and share the meaning of these different cultural ways of knowing within the installation so as to move the knowing to a more global, syncretized perspective. The installation consists of large encaustic paintings, each representative of one of the Tattwas. *Manifesto of an Arteologist* (2016) is the centerpiece of the installation. It is representative of the *Tattva Akash*, from which all energy emanates. It includes the skylight of The Museo de Arte de Ponce, radiating the vibrant energy of the sun of the Caribbean; the circular floor piece below with painted African figures riding bicycles and projecting the geometric elements of the tattvas, cowrie shells suggestive of vibrant forces, and the deep black meditative oval of the ether element. Within a box designed to look like a book are two iPads running two frequency clocks connected to the internet. The “book” is placed on a metal pedestal at the center of the floor installation, with a small painting of the oval mounted in the base of the pedestal.

Vayú / Respirando (2013), on the north wall, integrates tattvas and Afro-Caribbean symbolism to capture the spiritual energy of air depicted by an African woman, the Madama, smoking a pipe. The air tattvar, symbolized by brown muted turquoise circles, interplays with the oval for ether across the bottom of the piece. These are punctuated by two ovals centered with crosses, an image introducing Christianity. The woman wears a dress patterned with the geometric forms of the tattvas, which alludes to light, perhaps coming from the sun or perhaps from the inner glow of the Madama. The Congo appears across the center of the painting as five African males moving in different directions. The piece, like air, is both heavy and light, dark and bright, ever present.

Akashic Archives (2014), on the south wall, represents the fire of tejas with a powerful conflation of cultural and spiritual symbols and imagery to convey the electrifying energy of the cosmos. In this encaustic painting I integrate the symbolism of both tattvas and Afro-Caribbean mythology and spirituality. The center of the painting shows an African male figure, the Congo, whose body is composed of all five Tattwa symbols. His foundation is the yellow square representing the earth; his lower torso is constructed with the white half moon of water. His upper torso, including his heart, manifests the red triangle indicative of fire; his neck is surrounded by the purplish

blue circle of air; and the dark blue oval of ether sits on his head. A rainbow made up of the tattva colors passes through the Congo's body, absorbing and vibrating energy. Symbols of the tattvas seem to dance around the figure. Three small African figures on bicycles, like the figures in the floor piece, ride on and through the vibrant rainbow. An even smaller African Madama powerfully anchors the right side of the painting. She is smoking a pipe or maybe meditating on the meaning of the universe.

Taíno Thought, 2016, is on the east wall. This encaustic painting on linen, is dominated by the depiction of the amorphous Taíno twins painted in the earth brown colors of the Caribbean Islands. There are several *Cemí* and small Taíno spirit-like faces dancing in the surrounding space anchored toward the bottom by a queen-like *Cemí*. The *Tattwa Prithvi*, the earth element, is depicted through the use of a rich yellow background color, part of which is an outlined square. The tattvas' geometric elements are found within the *cemí* on the right side of the Twins, balanced by the *Akash* oval, the *Tejas* triangle, and *he Apas* half moon on the other side.

In *Point of Origin*, 2010, on the west wall of the installation, I use West African symbolism, mythology and spirituality to address the profound experience of the origin of life. The painting includes a depiction of a fertility mask from the Ebo people of Nigera with pregnant women dancing in a circle around a figure that I interpret as Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of sweetness, love and beauty. Perched on top of the mask is a red phoenix, which by myth dies and is reborn every five hundred years. There is also an African, perhaps an Ebo male figure, obscured but a strong protective presence. The blue sea in the background brings into the piece the suggestion of water: the Atlantic connecting the Caribbean to Mother Africa, the place on earth where life originated. Although tattva symbolism is not included in this piece, I correlate the painting with the *Tattwa Apas* by hanging the piece on the west wall. I may also see a correlation between the fertility represented in the Ebo mask, the love of Oshun and the emotions and magnetism of water.

The installation as a whole, *Memory of Nature: The Rhythm of Life*, embodies stories and wisdom passed down by our collective ancestors. I apprehend, reconfigure and re-contextualize fundamental meaning from cultural and spiritual symbols and mythology. These are then offered to

the observer/participant as experiences that connect us with our past, help us make sense of the present and point with hope to a possible future, grounded in meaning. The integration of the Afro-Caribbean stories of my childhood and the tattvas connect both the Caribbean to West Africa across the Atlantic Ocean and East Africa to the land of the Sanskrit across the Indian Ocean. The world views embraced are linked by the intense Tropic of Cancer sun that warms the lands across which it moves, as seen streaming through the museum's skylight; by the common theme of respect for the fundamentals, which underpin existence; by an understanding of the elements as spiritual forces, which connect us to our earth and each other.

One may wonder, Why use the images of these ancient philosophical and mythological concepts of the fundamental elements of life to create works of art? What do these images and these concepts have to offer and convey to the public of the visual arts in the twenty-first century? What is the purpose and meaning?

It is precisely the importance of making sense of what is at issue in today's world that attracts me to the reconfiguration of these ancient ways of knowing. With global warming increasingly present in our lives, with natural disasters affecting the environments that must sustain us, with the need to exist sustainably with the natural environment, with the survival of the human species an approaching issue, we need a better way of understanding and living together in this world.

The concepts left to us by our ancestors, the images of balance and tranquility can teach us to reframe our existence on our planet. Maybe we can learn from them. This is the intentionality offered in *Memory of Nature: The Rhythm of Life*.

It is between those themes that my work is currently heading. Community work is a current priority, and this is nothing more than going back to environmental and ancestral roots. The La casa de arte y cultura de la Playa de Ponce is a concrete materialization of the arteologist's view.