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GARAGE

Nick Quijano's Whispering From Everyday Life

In a new show at Fort Gansevoort, the artist seeks inspiration in his native Puerto Rico's past and in its present.

By Sebastian Meltz-Collazo - Dec 11 2020



Nick Quijano, El Encuentro (Rendezvous), 2020, Gouache on Arches paper with wood matte, 12.5 x 12.5 inches.

Curious and excited about the complex dynamics that contemporary living can involve, Nick Quijano wants to feel everything. He digs deep into his dense catalogue of memories, picking out the beauty in every aspect he recalls. As a kid from the Bronx who would travel to San Juan in the 60s (until his mother surprised him one summer day, “We’re staying in Puerto Rico”), the artist’s paintings allude to the always flowing, ping-pong experience of immigrant life. For the occasion of his first exhibition with Fort Gansevoort, Nick Quijano’s Memories of Puerto Rico opens a door into everyday moments that begin to answer his biggest questions.

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Cumpleaños Con Brownie y Nilka (Happy Birthday with...)2020,
Gouache on Arches paper with wood matte, 12.5 x 12.5 inches.

In your interview with Bobbito García you talk about how you identify with a generation of Puerto Rican artists who want to speak to the people. Do you feel you have to keep a balance within your pieces to speak to Puerto Ricans who live in and out of the island?

I'm here (in Puerto Rico) so I respond to what's going on here. And I've exhibited in NY before in groups shows, but because of the opportunity I have right now to show my work through the gallery, I'm reconnecting with my childhood experiences. I'm taking in every part of living in the South Bronx through the 60s and incorporating them into my work. And I'm thrilled because the gallery has been receptive to that. So I always work towards wherever I'm at, because wherever that is, I'm me. It's never been about nostalgia or longing for the other, it's like Saudade: bringing out the sadness in the good parts and the wonderful things in the bad parts. Growing up it was more like, "Wow, look at what life is all about! Here I am like many other immigrants, growing up with all of this stimulus!" It's wonderful, but I don't look back as if it's something that was better or that I long for, rather it's something that brought up in me the true questions like "Where are we from, what is the human condition all about?" It's simply being where I am and asking the big questions as an immigrant, a legal alien, and addressing them through my work.

Do you think our tendencies to work with memories are a response to the sense of impermanence that comes with living in the tropics?

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Yes, and that's a human thing. Our Taíno ancestors would worship the sun and the mountains, they were sacred. That's the way we are, looking for meaning. And in this series I express how I find meaning through small moments. They're intimate, they're closed, they're like secrets, which is why I made them small like something whispered in your ear.

Nowadays we have so many gods to worship, but for you it's these small moments that expand in your heart and move you.

Absolutely, right on the money! Those moments are God because those moments are love, they're hope, despair because we're going to die, the uncertainty that there isn't going to be a tomorrow, the bond I have with my family, with my country. And in these moments I find ways to reconcile with the issues that bring us pain and suffering. There's been a lot of hate and violence planted in the last four years and I want to be a part of something that responds with love and a space to talk about these things.

What does the dance floor mean to you? Considering how Puerto Rican music travels and evolves through spaces as much as we do.

Mano, it's super intense. That one question can fill this whole zoom meeting. My uncle was Joe Quijano who was a big musician in the '60s so I was brought up in all that. I play saxophone and guitar... I even cut a record. And as a kid, I was going to dances, and my uncles would take me to gigs, and I would hang out with the musicians, I'd meet the sex workers, etc. And when I would come to PR my aunt would take me to dance as her chaperone to keep the guys at bay! My upbringing always had a song in the background, so it's really easy for me to paint those paintings. There's an essay by Doris Sommer called "Dancehall Democracy." It talks about how the Salón is a place for democracy, a space for those dynamics.

Often your paintings allude to photographs. Some images feel like snapshots or looking through a window. In "Siesta en el Catre" and "Bolerito" you even include photographs within the painting—in "Bolerito" there's even a frame within a frame. Do you feel a frustration with photography with regards to its representation of memory and what that stands for within the Puerto Rican experience?

Not at all! The specificity and the immediacy of that medium is so incredible. I look at photography as an instigator for an emotion as well as a surface to understand the emotions of the person who took the image in that moment, and that's wonderful! I use it as a reference where I try to understand the feelings I had whenever my picture was taken. It's like going back in time and that gives me more information to lay down in my paintings.

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Siesta en el catre (Nap on the cot), 2012, Gouache on Arches paper with wood matte, 12.5 x 12.5 inches.

Does that dynamic work within your paintings in which you go past the boundaries of the canvas? Especially in your piece “Cumpleaños con Brownie y Nika,” it’s as if you’re presenting two perspectives of the same subject but each offer different ideas.

Absolutely, those perspectives are time-based. Paintings are often about the past, and when I paint past the canvas and into the frame I attempt to bring immediacy into the piece as well, as if to say ‘This is happening now’ as well. This is a very personal piece because I’m depicting the memory of having my 3rd birthday while also celebrating that memory using the outside frame. The then and now are all dimensions that are happening at the same time. That’s why we can think about infinity! It’s already there before you, we just don’t have the capacity to see it all. Maybe when we’re out of here, outside of our bodies, we can have a better view of it.

On that note, when I looked at your painting Mercado, I was drawn into the headlines on the newspaper in relation to the food items being sold. Although the show is titled Memories of Puerto Rico, are you painting something towards the future on the island here?

Definitely! Mira, I’m pro-independence for this country. And I believe, like the citizens of every other country did at some point, that what’s best for us is to have the ability to make our choices and have the opportunities to strive as a nation. That doesn’t mean we’d be in a bad relationship with the U.S., I would just like to have a chance to exchange with everyone else in the world and sustain ourselves on our own terms. And we’re doing that now, little by little, but it’s so difficult

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when we've got a chokehold on our ability to do such things. So you're right, the painting talks about our produce and the state of agriculture on our island. I'm talking about the hopes I have for us to be sovereign, sustainable, so that we can continue to have memories as a people.



Mercado (Market), 2020, Gouache on Arches paper with wood matte, 12.5 x 12.5 inches.