

Today, Bookends presents the final in this year's series of conversations #CaribbeanStrong between Jacqueline Bishop and writers and artists from the region. Today's featured artist is Lionel Cruet, a visual artist and art educator born in San Juan, Puerto Rico who lives and works in New York City and San Juan where he has studied and exhibited his artwork. In his artistic work, he uses digital media from printed materials and audiovisual installations that confront problems related to the economy, geopolitics, and technology through referential metaphors about nature.

Lionel Cruet, when we met you were working on blue tarpaulin and working through ideas related to hurricanes Irma and Maria that ravaged your home island of Puerto Rico. Can you describe that work for us and also tell us how Puerto Rico is faring four years after both hurricanes?

The series of paintings you mention were made before hurricanes Irma and Maria. Interestingly enough, people find connections and meaning after the hurricanes happen. I feel that the paintings were a kind of a premonition that came from a research project I was doing at that time. When I created the series of paintings *Floods Aftermath and Other Hurricane Stories* I was immersed in a research investigation about the landscape and how it has been changing because of the cycles of hurricanes, and the direct effect that it has for our living conditions in Puerto Rico, yet also connected to other places that suffer from these same natural events. I took these blue tarps that are given to people as part of their emergency aid support and I used them as a support for my paintings to portray the abandonment and the suffering behind the stories of families that have lost it all. When I create my artworks I think about materials, concepts and the messages that can be communicated. It's not only the imagery. An interesting note is that lots of people think that the blue on the tarpaulin is painted over, but it is not painted, I'm using the colour of the material's surface and playing with the negative and positive sides of the image.

Puerto Rico's recovery has been a very slow process, but still there's a resilient attitude that people have developed, adjusting to the situations and finding solutions to problems that have never been presented before in our lifetime. Hurricane Maria left the island with lots of problems; in communications, access to electricity, health services, infrastructure, and much more. To restore these systems is difficult due to the rampant corruption that hovers over the island.

I find myself wondering — as climate change becomes more and more exacting on small island developing states like those we have in the Caribbean — what is the role of the artist in the discourses of climate change?

The role of the artist depends on their focus, interest, development, sense of belonging within communities and places. I can't say what they should or they must do. Artists have different approaches and each one of them express themselves with the approaches that speak to them.

Puerto Rico's Lionel Cruet's artworks are focused on the intimate relationship with the environment



(Photo: David P. Broda)



(Photo: Pablo Corradi)

Now, the concerns around climate change should be of interest to all of us — not only artists — and it should be of concern to a wider community and discussed within educational spaces and in the media. Of course, this is complicated because corporations and industries will not accept that they are the cause of climate change

and if the message gets spread, they will always try to suppress it. Art could be a channel to communicate these messages and ideas. If an artist is interested in these subjects they should know that their production can function to visualise these complex relationships and the effects that climate change is having on jeopardising

our collective future.

As a visual artist focused on our intimate relationship with the environment, how have you seen the pandemic impact everyday Puerto Ricans? Have you made work about/during this time?

In Puerto Rico the situation with the pandemic got politicised really quickly. At the beginning, the pandemic was somewhat controlled by the government but now the situation is similar to every other place in the world. I have not made any artwork with the theme about the pandemic.

However, I have kept really busy and active and this situation makes me rethink processes, purposes and modes of working. Early last year I had an interview with Sergio Perreira for ARTECAPITAL and we covered so many areas about my studio practice and I got deep insight about my own work that was exhibited at Faction Art Projects, NYC in an exhibition curated by Natasha Becker, titled *A Perfect Storm*. At the same time Yi Gallery published an article written by art historian Jonas Albro, and titled "Lionel Cruet: Layers of Place". It was also great to be invited to be part of a virtual panel discussion along with Awilda Sterling, Sarabel Santos Negrón and Ricardo Cabret, organised by Gener8tor and MECA in Puerto Rico. Then, as the quarantine started, I focused on my teaching practice as it all transferred online. I wanted to make sure my students were safe, healthy and staying creative during times of distress. I started an initiative to raise funds and prepare a box of art materials for my students. All of this happened during the confinement, and I was so grateful to reach my goal of raising \$3,000 in three days. After that I went to Puerto Rico and I found myself developing an independent residency programme, titled *banasta*, and its focus is to offer sessions of art criticism to develop artistic production and a thematic residency programme on the island which I'm developing along with the wonderful and talented Puerto Rican colleagues Monica Felix, Kevin Quiles Bonilla, Krsia Ayala, Heryk Tomassini, Sofia Reeser del Rio and Donald C Escudero Rivera. Also, while in Puerto Rico I got to exhibit some drawings at the new book shop, Floresta Libros and Art Gallery, which was titled *Que siempre tengamos libros y flores*.

Then in August I had my second solo exhibition, titled *Dusk/Daybreak*, at Yi Gallery in NYC.

The body of work presented was the photographic and print projects that offered alternative views of coastal spaces, and the effects of natural and artificial light in these places, as well the relationships that happen in these areas with tensions around contamination. I thought it was necessary to flood the exhibition space with a red light which caused lots of sensation. This was covered widely in the press.

In September, I participated in a virtual research programme led by Godofredo Pereira, A+RC Summer Intensive at the ICA Miami, and we addressed urgent climate issues and environmental research. It was exciting to have the opportunity to interact with artists, writers and creators from around the world. Towards the end of



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the year, I was invited to be part of a series of workshops titled *Signos de los Tiempos* led by artist and performer Ernesto Pujol at el Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico. During the closing event I presented an interactive audiovisual performance titled *Redirecting Sun*, where I used a video projected image referencing the sun and an atmospheric sound. With the performance I radiated light to the participants of the program. At the same time, some of the paintings from *Floods Aftermath and Other Hurricane Stories* were exhibited at The Eastern Connecticut State University Art Gallery and Ethan Cohen Gallery in NY. I was also honoured to contribute to Museum Ed Voices, a platform that allows artists and educators to share their experiences educating communities in New York City through the arts. So all in all it's been a pretty hectic time for me despite the pandemic.

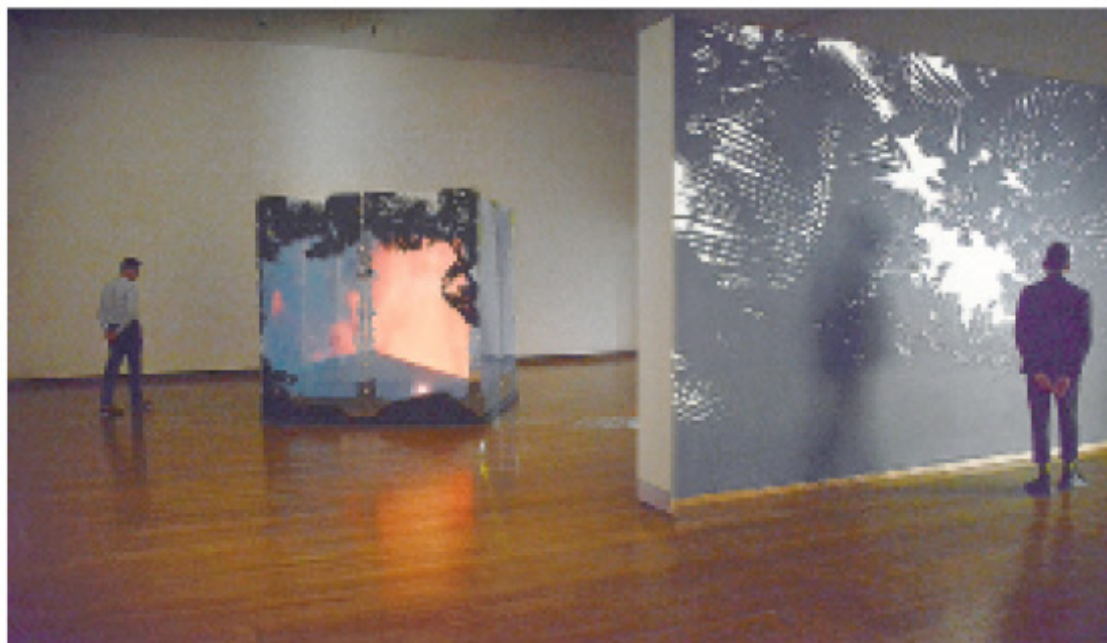
Your practice is research-heavy and your artworks are mostly research-based. Can you take us through your research process and explain to us why as an artist you rely so heavily on research?

In my practice I employ multiple methodologies to research the projects that are seen. I feel this is a process of organising thoughts, references, resources, discourses and other materials of interest in the topics that are to be explored. For me it helps enormously to organise ideas, impulses and find references to every single thought or situation that I encounter during the process. Also, at times this process is collaborative. I use images, quotes, texts, videos and quick sketches and other collateral supportive material to get a clear sense of my ideas. This process can take weeks up to months previous to the resolution of an artwork in its final version. I have a number of people asking me to transform this research process into an exhibition and I think it could be a possibility in the future.

Where did you grow up? What schools did you attend? And when did you realise that you were a visual artist? Do you consider yourself Puerto Rican and/or American?

Excellent question! In fact, it's good to clear this out now that you're giving me the platform to speak in this regard. I consider myself Puerto Rican with legal American documentation. Recently I have faced some push-back where some people think that the opportunities I receive in my career so far come from having some kind of privileged background or are given to me, and that's incorrect. I do not come from a family that is positioned in the arts. I actually had to work really hard to build my career, and I'm still doing this. I think I'm still finding my path and my direction. I have always been interested in the arts and humanities even at a young age. I was always creating, drawing, painting and even more so when I discovered photography and the computer. I have been grateful that I have come across people who have guided me in the right direction and who have been extremely critical about my practice. That has had a positive effect on my practice.

In regard to my education, the first 12 years were an exploratory phase. I always



had an interest in the arts and my parents supported and guided me in finding art programmes to be enrolled in. Even my high school was very artistically oriented and challenging and I studied in the public school education system in Puerto Rico where I was exposed to the visual and performing arts, theatre and such, and this exposure had a significant effect on me. These interdisciplinary practices were a starting point for my career. I completed my bachelor's degree at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño San Juan, Puerto Rico. That was a formative place where I expanded ideas of art-making into different formats of making. After graduating in 2011, I immediately continued my studies in contemporary photography at The School of the Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City. I would go on to graduate studies at the City College of New York where I completed a master's degree in the arts, with a focus in digital and interdisciplinary art practices. I believe that being in that programme helped me to mature as an artist. I started to get more articulate about my work. I arrived with lots of questions that were unanswered while I was in Puerto Rico and during my master's I got to deeply engage with new technologies, concepts of new media, surveillance, virtuality, ecofeminism, and other topics of interest that one way or another are part of my work these days.

You move between living in Puerto Rico and New York City. Explain for us why you choose to live in New York City as opposed to some other mainland city?

To be really honest, I moved to New York City because I had invitations and opportunities that were not offered in Puerto Rico. And I have always been interested in the history of New York City as it regards the arts. It's a place where lots of artists have been. Not only in the visual arts, but also in music, theatre and performing arts. It's a rich place where the arts converged. Also, let's face it, in New York City there's a market, forums, discussions and opportunities that do not happen in most other places.

In some of your work there are "...voices and songs of proclamations in the void" which "became the aesthetics of the work". What do you mean by this? How do you reconcile using "sound" as a visual art medium?

I have always been interested in sound; and it has become an integral part of my art projects and installations. Recordings become environmental sounds, but in other cases there's voice recording or songs that complement the narratives and the experiences of viewing an artwork. For instance, in the audiovisual installation *Espacio Intangible* (2014) I used voice recording from a "word to speech system" that interpreted the images and the metadata of images; and in the installation *Intangible Sites* (2016) presented in Taos, New Mexico, I used voice recording from the participants who contributed their images and stories with me. These voices are proclaiming memories and experiences, creating a sense of place. Another example is the installation *At The End of Daybreak* (2017) where I used a narrated portion of a poem by Aimé Césaire from his *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land*. This voice was emerging from the centre of a translucent, life-size cube that was isolated in the middle of the gallery. I always think about this installation as the metaphor of an island that is surrounded by the ocean; in this case the piece was isolated in the middle of the gallery space.

Finally, can you give us a sense of what you are working on these days?

In terms of research, I'm exploring climate change effects, the anthropocene, cosmology and the rhizome. I'm also creating an installation art project titled *Rhizophora at the Center for Contemporary Art in Quito* that is inspired by the entangled memories of mangroves. This project is under the curatorial perspective of Eduardo Carreras. Additionally, I'm participating in a residency programme in Quito, named Ventisca, organised by La Planta. I will be focusing on subjects of ecology and alternative forms of education. I'm also part

of an upcoming exhibition titled *Seascape Poetics* curated by Bettina Pérez-Martínez at the 4th Space Gallery in Concordia University in Montréal, Canada. Last but not least, I'm continuing the development of *banasta: residencia artística*, a programme that is pioneering in Puerto Rico; something like this has never happened before and it will transform the artistic production on the island. We are looking for funders and supporters and if you are interested in being part of this initiative please communicate with me on social media for updates: Instagram @lionelcruet @lionelcruetstudio.



Visual artist and art educator Lionel Cruet



Jacqueline Bishop's latest book is *The Gift of Music and Song: Interviews with Jamaican Women Writers*.

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