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Finding Common Ground at El Museo del Barrio

Hiram Maristany's "Hydrant: In the Air," 1963, gelatin silver print, in the exhibition "Down These Mean Streets: Community and Place in Urban Photography" at El Museo del Barrio. Credit...Hiram Maristany

By Holland Cotter
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Location, location, location. In real estate, place determines value. Sometimes it can for art too. El Museo del Barrio originated in 1969 in classrooms, storefronts and a repurposed fire station in what was then the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood of East Harlem. The museum was a product of pride and necessity. In local public schools, young artist-activists, often working free, taught children the virtues of cultural self-expression and communal self-sufficiency. And they taught from experience. At the time, no mainstream art institution in the city would show their art. They needed a museum of their own and, collectively, they created one.

In 1977, El Museo del Barrio moved to its present address in a city-owned building on Fifth Avenue at 104th Street. The relocation gave the institution more space and greater visibility. But it also took it physically out of the heart of the Barrio, and set the stage for a potential change of character. A territorial tug of war began between supporters who wanted the institution to remain community-identified, and others who were pushing it to become a broadband showcase for Latino and Latin-American art.

The tension has stayed high since, and in the past few years, turned ugly. After the museum's first non-Puerto Rican director, Julián Zugazagoitia, left in 2010, his successor, Margarita Aguilar, was fired just 18 months after her appointment. Ms. Aguilar's successor, Jorge Daniel Veneciano, abruptly quit as executive director after two years. Now a new director, Patrick Charpenel, formerly of the contemporary Museo Jumex in Mexico City, is in place.

"65 East 125th Street, Harlem," by Camilo José Vergara, 1980, inkjet print. Credit...Camilo José Vergara

His arrival coincided with a temporary closing of the museum for upgrades. The galleries have now reopened with two substantial, and very different, traveling exhibitions. Both being loan shows, they give little sense of what El Museo itself can produce. Yet their pairing seems calculated to bridge the rift in the institution's bifurcated mission.

One of the shows, "Down These Mean Streets: Community and Place in Urban Photography," which comes from the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington is a generously annotated survey of Latino street photography dating from the late 1950s through the 1970s, during years when El Museo was being conceived and established, and the connection of the show to East Harlem is clear.

Frank Espada's "Cindy (Blake Avenue, East New York)," 1963, gelatin silver print. Credit...Frank Espada

The exhibition title comes from the best-selling 1967 autobiography of Piri Thomas, a community organizer of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent who grew up in what was then called Spanish Harlem. Five of the show's 10 photographers — Frank Espada (1930-2014), Perla de Leon, Hiram Maristany, Winston Vargas and Camilo José Vergara — took that neighborhood, or Latino sections of Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and Brownsville in Brooklyn, as their beat.
Mr. Maristany, who in 1969 became a founding member and official photographer of the Young Lords, a leftist Latino activist organization, still lives in East Harlem. (An exhibition in his honor was organized there by Hunter East Harlem Gallery in 2015.)

Hiram Maristany's "Children at Play," 1965, printed 2016, gelatin silver print. Credit...Hiram Maristany

Like street photographers in Newark, Los Angeles and other American cities with large, close-knit Latino populations, Mr. Maristany works in a genre that blends documentary and portraiture. He sees what's wrong in the immediate world he lives in — the poverty, the crowding — but also sees the creativity encouraged by having to make do, and the warmth generated by bodies living in close, affectionate proximity.

The result, at least in this determinedly positive show — organized by E. Carmen Ramos, deputy chief curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum — is advocacy art in the form of a kind of extended-family album. (Perla de Leon's views of a leveled South Bronx are exceptions.) This view by no means represents the full, complex story of a time and place; no art can. But it's a needed alternative to a poverty-porn that has long filled the popular media, and that made the sight of a United States president jocosely tossing rolls of paper towels to hurricane-devastated Puerto Ricans in San Juan last year unacceptable to some eyes.

The second show, **"Liliana Porter: Other Situations,"** organized by the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Ga., couldn't be more different in look and tone. Born in Argentina in 1941, Ms. Porter arrived in New York City at age 22 and has made it her primary home ever since. In the early 1960s with two other Latin American artists — José Guillermo Castillo (1938-1999) and Luis Camnitzer, to whom she was married — she founded the experimental New York Graphic Workshop, after which her art took an increasingly Conceptualist direction.

The installation "Tejedora" ("The Weaver"), from 2017, in the second show at El Museo del Barrio, "Liliana Porter: Other Situations," organized by the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Ga. Credit...Dylan Wilson

The survey of 35 objects, installations and videos, covers a ponderous block of time — some 50 years — but, as superbly installed by Humberto Moro, curator of exhibitions at SCAD, it feels unanchored in time and anti-gravitational. In pieces from the early 1970s, Ms. Porter adds spare pencil lines in photographs of her own hands and face as if to challenge optical perception: which is realer, the photographic image or the artist's mark?

Despite the early work's formal economy, Pop Art was a big inspiration. In the 1980s and '90s, Ms. Porter began assembling and photographing groups of toys and figurines found in flea markets and antique shops. In one example, "The Intruder," images of Mao Zedong, George Washington,

Pinocchio, the East Asian goddess Guanyin, Lassie, and the Venezuelan physician-saint José Gregorio Hernández rub shoulders. Who, exactly, might qualify as an intruder in so multicultural a crowd is hard to say.

Visual puzzles, triggered by a hallucinatory use of scale, are this artist's specialty. A great wash of cobalt paint covering a gallery wall appears to have its source in a minute statue of a man holding a paint brush. In a series called "Forced Labor," an inches-high figure of a knitting woman generates an oceanic pile of pink fabric. And what looks from afar like a smudgy, multipanel abstract painting proves to be a sculptural depiction of a military disaster. Up close you see that the smudges are clusters of toy figures — tipped-over carts, fallen horses, soldiers — stuck to the canvas surface with engulfing gouts of pigment.

Ms. Porter's "Trabajo Forzando (Mujer Barriendo)" or "Forced Labor (Sweeping Woman)," 2004-2018, figurine on wooden plinth and blue sand. Credit...Dylan Wilson

Cruelty and loss are at the bottom of Ms. Porter's work. Her video, "Matinee," which she directed with Ana Tiscornia, to a tender score by Sylvia Meyer, is a succession of tabletop tableaus enacted by dolls and figurines. The scenes are winsome and funny till disaster strikes: A ceramic child is abruptly beheaded by a hammer; in a segment called "Chicken Salad," a sudden avalanche of greenery buries a windup toy bird.

Hers is a very adult art that brings us back to childhood: We project ourselves on these toys, find responsive presences in them. And, in an off-handed way, she links us up with lived history.

"Matinee" opens on a weirdly ominous note as the camera pans a porcelain souvenir image of John F. and Jacqueline Kennedy seated in their fateful open-roofed Dallas limousine.

The Kennedy assassination was still very much in the air when Ms. Porter moved to the United States in 1964, so it is part of her history. And as a New Yorker, so is El Museo and *its* history, even though she was downtown, not in East Harlem during the museum's formative years. At the same time, she has said that she still considers herself Argentine, and returns there regularly.

Ms. Porter's installation "Man Painting" ("Hombre Pintando"), 2018, figure on wooden cube and blue acrylic paint. Credit...Martin Seck

In short, Ms. Porter's art, which is not declaratively Latin American or Latina, fits comfortably within the mission of a museum that describes itself broadly as "a Latino and Latin American cultural institution." The expansiveness is valid. Much has changed, culturally, in the past half century. The ethnic demographics of the now gentrifying East Harlem have changed. The dimensions of "Latino" as an identity have changed. So have the needs of cultural institutions to attract audiences, local and global.

What if the Studio Museum in Harlem restricted itself to black artists who lived, or had roots, in Harlem? That would be unhealthy for the museum, and the artists who showed there, and probably be fiscally unsustainable.

But some things have not changed. The political disenfranchisement of Puerto Rico continues, evident in the United States government's shameful post-hurricane treatment of the island. In the United States itself, class and economic barriers based on ethnicity stand firm. And cultural accomplishment, achieved against high odds, is often ignored or forgotten.

El Museo begins its self-description in press material with these words: "founded by a coalition of Puerto Rican educators, artists and activists." And that reality should be honored and preserved in the institution itself. El Museo began as a platform for cultural expression and communal activism, and should remain that. Yet, how could it not be useful now for that local activism to share a larger Latin American/Latino/Latina/Latinx context, a wider global stage? Common ground is a powerful place to be.