

# TEMPORAL

## PUERTO RICAN RESISTANCE

CHRISTOPHER GREGORY-RIVERA  
NATALIA LASSALLE-MORILLO  
MARI B. ROBLES LÓPEZ  
EDUARDO MARTINEZ  
OJOS NEBULOSOS

ADRIANA PARRILLA  
DENNIS M. RIVERA PICHARDO  
ERIKA P. RODRIGUEZ  
EDRA SOTO  
SUPAKID  
ROGELIO BÁEZ VEGA



Mari B. Robles López  
Paro Nacional, julio 24, 2019

Puerto Rico's legal status as an unincorporated territory of the United States has long been a source of both confusion and contention. A former Spanish colony ceded to the United States during the Spanish-American War, the island has been subjected to a benign form of colonialism even after its people were granted American citizenship in 1917.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, separatist movements often had to face top-down legislation aimed at coercing Puerto Rican assimilation. Even the 1952 constitution labeled the island an *Estado Libre Asociado*, which officially translates as a free associated state or "Commonwealth"—underscoring the island's statelessness.

In the past four years, a tumultuous chain of events has further strained Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States, causing a surge in mainstream news coverage outside the island.<sup>2</sup> The summer of 2016 marked a significant moment in Puerto Rico's contemporary history with the passing of the US federal law known as the Puerto Rican Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). Enacted to oversee the Puerto Rican government-debt crisis, the law has resulted in detrimental cuts to the island's public services. Severe austerity measures have made it impossible to address the island's crumbling infrastructure, as the local economy's second decade of recession has left the island vulnerable to further crises, particularly Hurricane María in September 2017. In the aftermath of the hurricane, Puerto Rico's population winnowed by several thousand untallied deaths and the ensuing exodus of many more residents. In July 2019, the island erupted in protest. While the primary issue was the corruption of the island's governor, the protests were the result of long-simmering frustrations with the status quo.



Dennis M. Rivera Pichardo  
Todo está bien, Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, September 25, 2017



In American media, Puerto Rico is seldom discussed outside of these flashpoint political events. Ongoing crises that affect the island on a daily basis receive minimal coverage, and Puerto Ricans are often left to tell their stories only to one another. In the United States, images of their struggles occasionally permeate the news—photographs of disaster, desperation, and moments of fleeting triumph. With the narrative properties of visual news media in mind, *Temporal* explores a cultural reclaiming of storytelling through image and photojournalist practices.

The exhibition's title *Temporal* is not solely a reference to the temporalities of the photographic image, news cycles, and colonialism. In Spanish, *temporal* also translates to storm, suggesting not just a literal hurricane, but the inevitability of a popular upswell of anti-government sentiment. Puerto Ricans will also recognize the term *temporal* from a Puerto Rican folk song of the same name, popularized in the musical form of *plena*. *Plena* has been referred to as the “sung newspaper” of the people, telling the stories and gossip of the barrios through song. Percussive and mobile due to the use of hand drums, it is used in contemporary protest movements to communicate the Puerto Rican people's most pressing social issues—violence against women, government corruption, and looming disasters, natural or humanmade—while providing a rhythmic format where all of these grievances can come together as a harmonious medley. *Temporal* is thus organized with this format in mind, with these same issues that are often woven into traditional *plena* songs. As musician and historian Ramón López states: “Plena is alive and present in daily puertoricanness because it expresses the communal memory that ties together history and actuality.”<sup>3</sup>

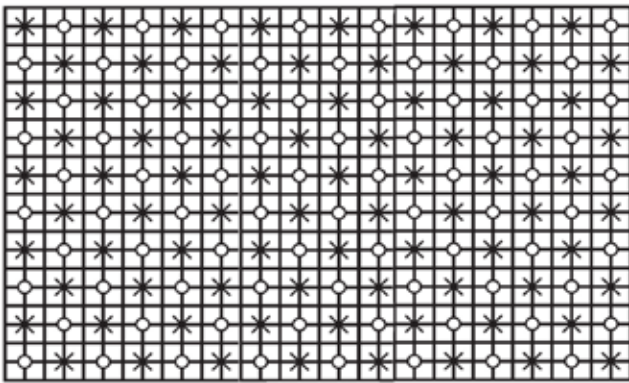
Adriana Parrilla  
Arsilla, Santa María, 2017



Mari B. Robles López  
Juventud divino tesoro, 1 de mayo, 2019



SUPAKID  
Combo Familiar, 2017



Edra Soto  
GRAFT, 2020



Dennis M. Rivera Pichardo  
Don Ramón, La Perla, Puerto Rico,  
Wednesday October 11, 2017

In the exhibition, works by eleven contemporary artists and photojournalists explore these interconnected sociopolitical issues. Interdisciplinary artist **Edra Soto** (Puerto Rican, b. 1971) showcases a new iteration of her ongoing project *GRAFT*, an intervention of vernacular architecture modeled after *quebrasoles* (ornamental concrete blocks that provide shade from the sun) and *rejas* (wrought iron screens that serve as protective barriers on homes) used prominently on the island. The work becomes photographic with her insertion of viewfinders embedded in the structure that reveal images she has taken while in Puerto Rico, including immediately following the passage of María. Works by **Mari B. Robles López** (Puerto Rican, b. 1993) merge found objects with her photojournalist practice—by printing her photographs on a FEMA tarp, pots and pans used in recent noise protests, and hand drums used in plena, she displays her documentation of protests and María in a way that communicates the events in a personal and cultural manner, removed from their original news media context. Similarly, photographs taken during long power blackouts and of life among strewn trees and debris from damaged businesses allude to everyday life in the wake of María, with selections of works by photographers **Erika P. Rodríguez** (Puerto Rican, b. 1988), **Dennis M. Rivera Pichardo** (Puerto Rican, b. 1988), **Adriana Parrilla** (Puerto Rican, b. 1983), and **SUPAKID** (Puerto Rican).



Natalia Lassalle-Morillo  
Still from *La Ruta*, 2018

Exploring the roles of women in a failing economy and the aftermath of María, an installation by **Ojos Nebulosos** (Puerto Rican, b. 1995) *Kiskeya Salón* transports the viewer to beauty salons in Puerto Rico through photographs, videos, and objects. Inspired by her aunts' salons, one of which closed after María, it explores the struggles of women-owned businesses, displacement, and Dominican immigration on the island. Concerning the effects of unsustainable infrastructure, *La Ruta*, a three-channel video installation by **Natalia Lassalle Morillo** (Puerto Rican) takes audiences through a tourism route built in 1974 that is now known for both its precarious roads and remote mountain location, its inaccessibility resulting in the loss of its histories. Also related to these themes of dystopian urbanisms, **Rogelio Báez Vega** (Puerto Rican, b. 1974) presents his sculptural work *Field Day*, which replicates the topography of abandoned school sites in wood, photographs, and video, commenting on the massive school closures on the island due to PROMESA, María, and the recent earthquakes.



Ojos Nebulosos  
*Kiskeya Salón*, 2015–20



Rogelio Báez Vega  
*Field Day*, 2020



Providing a historical background to the resistance movement through a contemporary lens, photographer **Christopher Gregory-Rivera** (Puerto Rican, b. 1989) presents *Las Carpetas*, a series of photographs exploring an archive in Puerto Rico—a collection of physical file folders created and kept by the Puerto Rican Police Department in collaboration with the FBI for a surveillance operation aimed at silencing the independence movement on the island.

In the final gallery, a wall of protest imagery displays photo-documentation of post-PROMESA demonstrations with a focus on July 2019, including selections from Rodríguez, Robles López, SUPAKID, and photojournalist **Eduardo Martínez** (Puerto Rican, b. 1974). The wall of images is inspired by the chaotic yet communal mural *La Plena* (1952–54) by Puerto Rican graphic artist and painter Rafael Tufiño, who brought to life several stories from plena songs. Tufiño was interested in how the stories from plena captured the Puerto Rican people better than photographs could.<sup>4</sup> In our current climate, with constant distrust of media coverage or anger at lack thereof, *Temporal* explores the potential for photographic practice and the image to communicate and support Puerto Rican resistance.

### **Dalina Aimée Perdomo Álvarez**

Curatorial Fellow for Diversity in the Arts

1. Cesar Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

2. Data from [https://archive.org/details/tv?q=puerto%20rico&and\[\]=-year%3A%222017%22](https://archive.org/details/tv?q=puerto%20rico&and[]=-year%3A%222017%22) and [mediacloud.org](https://mediacloud.org) shows an increase in the news mentions of Puerto Rico since 2016, reaching a peak in 2017 after Hurricane María.

3. Ramón López, *Los bembeteos de la plena puertorriqueña* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 2008).

4. Mensaje de la directora ejecutiva del instituto de cultura puertorriqueña, <https://www.icp.pr.gov/mensaje-de-la-directora-ejecutiva-del-instituto-de-cultura-puertorriqueña/>