



Lina Puerta
Migration, Nature,
and the Feminine

Lina Puerta:
Migration, Nature, and the Feminine

October 13, 2021–February 5, 2022

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HUNTER
EAST HARLEM
GALLERY

2180 Third Avenue at 119th Street
New York, NY 10035



Introduction

Klaudia Ofwona Draber, Curator & Arden Sherman, Organizer

Lina Puerta: Migration, Nature, and the Feminine is a survey exhibition of the artist's work spanning the last eighteen years and created mostly during her time as an East Harlem resident. The artworks in the exhibition showcase Puerta's use of imagery rooted in her Colombian upbringing and Latinx experience. Examining the relationship between nature and the human-made, and engaging themes of xenophobia, hyper-consumerism, food justice, and ancestral knowledge, Puerta creates mixed-media sculptures, installations, collages, handmade-paper paintings and wall hangings by combining a wide range of materials: from artificial plants, paper pulp, to found personal and recycled objects. The use of body adornments such as sequins, fabric, lace, and jewelry reference the body, and conjure emotions of joy and celebration.

Puerta's sculptures contain anatomical and botanical elements. These delicate hybrids are rich compositions rendered in a complex layering of materials and techniques. Otherworldly landscapes, referencing the interior of the body, are contained in suitcases, and bell jars, or become their own ecosystems. Her artworks play out as simultaneously mysterious, spiritual, and magical. Vulvas, breasts, and uteri forms evoke psychological states grounded in pre-Columbian fertility

deities, and are presented arrested of taboos or hypersexualization.

Puerta's most recent works on paper and fabric emerge from her process of connecting to the knowledge of Indigenous peoples. The artworks are inspired by patterns created through weaving practices of Kamëntsa and Inga communities of Colombia related to food and cultivated nature passed down across generations of women. Puerta's use of colonial traditions like quilting and embroidery pay tribute to the women who practiced this craft as an escape from social isolation and as a way to seek mutual aid. By integrating these two aspects of her Mestiza ancestry, Puerta seeks to uplift undervalued knowledge and recuperate alternative ways of living that propose a more sustainable and biodiverse future.

Exhibiting her survey show at Hunter East Harlem Gallery—in the heart of El Barrio—is significant to Puerta as she resided in the community for over 15 years.

Lina Puerta: Migration, Nature, and the Feminine is curated by Klaudia Ofwona Draber with associate curator Sofia Ramirez. The exhibition is organized by KODA and Arden Sherman at Hunter East Harlem Gallery. Support for this exhibition is provided by KODA, Hunter College Department of Art and Art History and The Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant.

Untitled (Turtle 1), 2016

28"H. x 16"W. x 2.5"D.

Handmade abaca, cotton and linen papers; reused turtle shell, trims, leather scraps, discarded plastic construction net, lace, fake fur, shells from necklaces previously worn by the artist, reused doll eyeballs gifted to the artist by her late mother and recycled food netting.



Lacelimb, 2013

22"H. x 23"W. x 22"D.

Polyurethane, polystyrene, concrete, paint, fabric, lace, fiberfill, artificial plant and moss; beads, trims, sequins and acrylic rods.



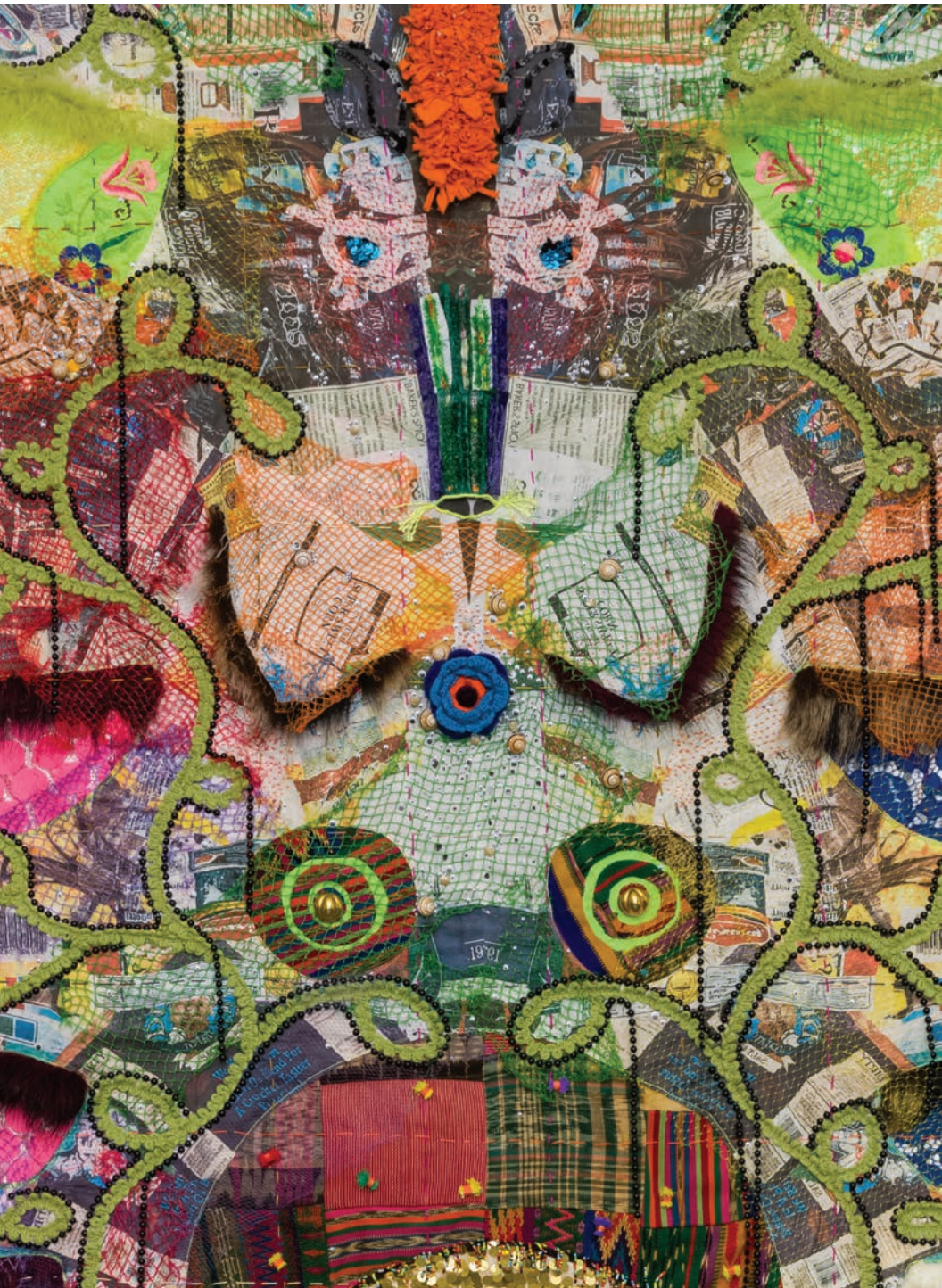
Neurorainbowtic, 2012
(Reworked from *Neurocellvatic*, 2009)

8"H. x 4.5"W. x 4.5"D.
Polyurethane foam, wire, cotton thread, fabric, beads, resin monofilament, pompons, artificial plants, wood base and glass dome.

Herida 2 (Wound 2), 2008

16"H. x 10"W. x 9"D.
Canvas, acrylic, polymer gel, monofilament, fabric, fiberfill, pompons, bottle caps, thread, plastic leaves and beads.





The Lives of Plants and Materials

Rocio Aranda-Alvarado

Roots, seeds, leaves, stems, tubers, flowers, and pods. Lace, leather, jersey, acrylic fur, polyester, chain necklaces, cotton, handmade embroideries and textiles, and plastic netting. Ceramic, pigment, charcoal, resin, and paper pulp. These lists represent merely a partial inventory of the material world that Lina Puerta draws on for her multi-layered sculptures, paper-based works, and installations. Through these materials, the artist has created an entire universe of possibility, touched by baroque sensibility and the aesthetics of street style and culture, and intersecting with her ruminations on social issues. Feminism, climate change, indigenous practices, the plight of farm workers, these have also stirred her ideas.

The artist originally became entranced with the idea of making objects through her work in ceramics, with early

2000s classes at Greenwich House Pottery. Organic ceramic forms became central in works that also included hair, silk flowers, acrylic paint, wood, and assorted fibers. These forms evolved to refer to human anatomy. They became the centerpieces of intimate, altar-like constructions housed in small suitcases and surrounded by a landscape of artificial plants and domestic adornments. This close connection between body and landscape pervades much of the artist's work, especially from 2004 to 2010. Like feminist art of the 1970s, Puerta's work offers the possibility of seeing the insides of the human body and female genitalia as comforting spaces, ones that are deeply synchronized with the seasonal paths of nature and the life cycle. Her *Árbol* from 2007 invites viewers to enter and sit inside the trunk of the tree, surrounded by shiny pink fabric and lights that blink

as though in rhythm with a heartbeat or the inward and outward cycle of breathing. The tree itself is a reminder of the sycamores that are abundant in the humble streets of East Harlem, where the artist worked for the majority of her career. In this way, the artist also weaves the human presence of these streets into her work, the abundant golden chains serving as the standard bearers of El Barrio's style.

This alignment of form, fabric, and organic life led to a powerful series of works that voiced themselves as both small sculptures and large-scale and site-specific works. In these objects, we see both softer, more "feminized" materials such as plastic plants, golden chains, stretch fabrics, trims, and beads, and materials traditionally associated with masculine endeavors, such as concrete, resin, wood, plexiglass, and urethane foam. In Lucy Lippard's essay on the making of art from non-art or domestic materials, she notes that male artists who dabble in these materials are not "lessened" by this practice, but that when women use materials that have traditionally been

the realm of men, they remain "inferior or just freakishly amazing."¹ By combining these historically "gendered" materials into singular objects, Puerta claims for herself the legacies of both these forms and champions them in works that range from modest to majestic scales.

Puerta's work is part of a global legacy of women artists working at different times and in different places with "non-traditional" materials, sometimes referred to as "making something from nothing."² Like certain feminist artists that preceded her, such as Miriam Shapiro, Judy Chicago, and others, Puerta's use of fabrics is intended to reference femininity and the body, fabrics from the history of art, and domestic textiles, but also and significantly, pre-Hispanic weavings, belief systems, and ways of working. This commitment to indigenous artistic forms and philosophies has shaped the artist's thinking about her materials: the history of plants and fibers, how they are planted, harvested, dyed, worked, and formed. She extends this way of making meaning to her newer

body of works, in which various parts of plants are considered as miniature representations of the lifecycle of the whole of the environment, the climate, the earth, and the role of agriculture in our historic and contemporary world. This is voiced in two important themes the artist has addressed: the plight of farm workers and our culture of excess.

Her interest in indigeneity makes the artist reconsider our contemporary society's obsession with accumulation and subsequent waste. Puerta tries never to buy anything new and is deeply respectful of everything handmade. She understands the overproduction of things that we dispose of as part of our life in late capitalism, and how waste is as much a product of colonialism and globalization as are other social ills. She considers the integrity of the object as she respectfully adds it to the accumulated surface of her works. Puerta also regularly signals the broad dependence on the labor of exploited and underpaid farm workers, particularly during the continuing 2020-21 global COVID pandemic. It is a theme taken up also by Mexican

American artists from the 1960s on, and Puerta capitalizes on the image of a plant as both sacred being and daily sustenance. Here, she draws deeply on indigenous beliefs about humanity and our relationship to the natural world, understanding it as sacred and non-hierarchical.

In his 2000 essay on the baroque as a way to understand hybridity/ *mestizaje* in visual culture and Latin American (and I would argue, Latinx) art, Victor Zamudio-Taylor writes: "*Mestizaje* is systemic and has permeated...material, spiritual and intellectual cultures throughout the continent. A dialogue between European Baroque and that of the New World has nurtured *mestizo* forms, themes and perspectives that characterize artistic expressions from Latin America."³ Using this citation, I would expand the locus to our hemisphere, rather than just the continent, and believe that this framing can also apply to work by Latinx artists living in the United States. We see the baroque in Puerta's accumulations on the surface of her

hand-made pulp paper. We see the *mestizaje* in the disparate objects piled onto the surfaces of her small and large-scale sculptures. It is present in the integration of hand-woven textiles by the indigenous women of Central and South America into layer upon layer of acrylic fur, lace, tapestries, leather, golden chains and other materials. Indeed, these handmade objects are among the most precious to her, including her mother's own crochet work, included in *Moth(er)*, 2020, embroideries saved from her own clothing and jewelry, and many others rescued from the mounds of possibilities at Materials for the Arts.

Taken together, these objects in the exhibition represent the depth and breadth of Lina Puerta's work, her consideration of individual and collective histories, her interpretation of the meanings of varied materials, and how their significance is changed when they are layered together. Objects that might seem to contradict one another in other settings are here hybridized into a new whole that suggests multiple possibilities. Rescue and recycling are placed in the service of a signifying accumulative process that sculpts and mirrors the many life cycles of the universe.

- 1 Lucy Lippard, "Making Something Out of Nothing," from Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995): 135.
- 2 *How to Make Something from Nothing* is the title of a 1968 book about this practice, generally favored by women, and referenced in the previously cited essay on feminist art by Lippard, pp. 128-138.
- 3 Victor Zamudio-Taylor, "Ultrabaroque: Art, Mestizaje, Globalization," *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of 90s Latin American Art* (San Diego: SD Museum of Art, 2000): 144.

Rocio Aranda-Alvarado is a curator, writer, and Program Officer at Ford Foundation.



Moth(er), 2020

7'H. x 6'W.

Quilt made with digitally printed fabric (created during 2017 Joan Mitchell Foundation Artist Residency, of food wrappings from food consumed by fellow resident artists); discarded food nets, recycled fabrics; hand-woven, indigenous Guambiano (Colombian) belt; Peruvian textile and t-shirt previously worn by artist; fake fur, sequined and textured fabrics; shells from necklaces, previously worn by the artist, purchased or gifted while in Colombia and the Caribbean; crocheted flower made by artist's late mother, repurposed buttons and googly eyes. Photo by Etienne Frossard. Detail on page 8.



Árbol (Tree), 2007

10'H. x 4'W. x 4'D. (Adjustable height)
Fabric, metal, lights, sandbags, fiberfill and wooden stool.
Photos by Kevin Noble. Detail on left.



Untitled (Purple), 2014

40"H. x 40"W. x 2"D.

Concrete, polyurethane foam, wood, reed mesh, fabric, lace, acrylic sheeting, artificial moss, Swarovski crystals and flocking. Photo by Bill Orcutt.

Untitled (Basket and Watches), 2014

14"H. x 11"W. x 3"D.

Basket, polyurethane foam, concrete, fabric, faux fur, beads, watches, chains, beads, artificial moss, Swarovski crystals and flocking. Photo by Bill Orcutt.





In conversation with Lina Puerta

Sofia Ramirez, Associate Curator

Sofia Ramirez: Congratulations on this exhibition spanning eighteen years of your work! You became a full time artist in 2003, what made you decide to make that transition?

Lina Puerta: Thank you. After teaching art full time in NYC and the Long Island public schools for 10 years, I realized teaching did not allow me the time or energy to also create and be a practicing artist. This made me very unhappy and was beginning to affect my health. For this reason I quit at age 33, and joined Greenwich House Pottery in the Village where I was able to make my first body of work since graduating from college.

SR: You were born in New Jersey, raised in Colombia, then came back to live in the Northeast. A lot of your works in this exhibition are based on things you have seen and experienced while living in East Harlem.

LP: I moved to East Harlem in the early 2000s, when there was this vibe happening and a lot of Latinx artists were gathering. There was a gallery called Mixta on the 107th Street and Lexington Avenue owned by Tania Torres, a poet and artist. Every month on the full moon she would host wonderful poetry readings which would organically end in a party. Eliana Godoy, founder of Art for Change, opened Carlitos Cafe across from Mixta. La Cantina cafe was opened on the same block by poet and friend Veronica de Nadie, (my artwork *Jardin Sagrado*, 2003, features a poem by Veronica). I moved to El Barrio when Eliana gave me a job at the Cafe, and took me in as her roommate.

Untitled (Blue + Red) from the Tapestries Series, 2016

49"H. x 36"W.

Handmade paper composed of pigmented cotton, linen and abaca pulp; embedded with lace, sequined fabrics, velvet ribbon, fake fur, feathers, appliqué, chains and found insect wings.
Photo by Jeanette May.

My first solo show was at Carlitos Cafe. East Harlem was a Latinx art hub, which was very exciting. My first date with my husband, artist Alexis Duque, who lived in Harlem, was at Carlito's Cafe. When we moved to Pleasant Ave., we loved exploring and taking long walks in the neighborhood, and became very visually stimulated by the contrasts. There is a lot of rawness, life, and hardship, but there is something very real in East Harlem that I connect to. I grew up listening to salsa in Colombia, and in East Harlem you hear it blasted every day, as well as live *Bomba*, in the streets. The artwork entitled *Árbol (Tree)*, 2007, was inspired by the sycamore trees from Thomas Jefferson Park, just down the street from Pleasant Avenue. Many of the materials, such as used furniture, were bought on the streets of East Harlem from second-hand sidewalk vendors and incorporated into works such as *Naiad*, 2012, *Highness*, 2011 and *Cuboid*, 2013, featured in this exhibition. The dress used in *Princesita (Little Princess)*, 2007, was similarly sourced through a second-hand shop in El Barrio. These previously used items which might have belonged to someone in the community, I believe, come charged with energy from the neighborhood that connects to the Latinx experience.

SR: I recall that the *Botanico* series was originally influenced by East Harlem—in what way?

LP: When I moved to Pleasant Ave. in El Barrio, there were many empty lots in the area that would slowly be overtaken by weeds. The *Botanico* series, 2010–now, is based on wild nature sprouting out of the urban space. I am fascinated by the resilience and resistance, and the tension between the urban and wild nature—and how we are in a constant battle with certain species. Over time, I came to realize that *Botanico* is also influenced by the lush, unorganized, and very expressive, joyful

*Tomato Crop Picker from the Latino
Farmworker in the US Tapestry Series, 2017*

54"H. x 35"W.

Handmade paper composed of pigmented cotton and linen paper pulp; embedded with lace, velvet ribbon, fake fur, sequined and metallic fabrics; finished with trims, beaded and embroidered appliqué; feathers, gouache and chains. Included quote: "In a 2012 report, Human Rights Watch surveyed female farmworkers, nearly all of them had experienced sexual violence, or knew others who had." - Human Rights Watch. Photo by Jeanette May.





wilderness I grew up with in Colombia. This has been, to me, a beautiful surprise and realization that you carry with you your ancestral landscape.

Artificial plants are generally designed in their “prime” state, in full bloom, or budding, where there is no wilting. It’s a plant that never dies. I don’t think, in this society, we understand the entire value in the cycle of plants and life. With human life, especially in women, youth is over-valued, and when reaching old age you lose all value. This heavily reflects the tremendous imbalance we face as a culture.

The need and desire for artificial nature is to me a symptom of how lost and distant we are in our relationship with nature. If we were deeply in touch with nature, as our ancestors were, or as we were born to be, we would not need artificial plants. So I’m using these plants that are “desirable” in this culture, and deconstructing them to create nature that we often overlook, undervalue, and reject.

SR: *Moth(er)*, 2021, is the first piece you see when you enter the gallery. A moth is generally alarming but this work is embracing you when you look at it up close, how did *Moth(er)* come together?

LP: Is it really alarming? [laughter] This piece started with digitally printed fabric I created as an artist-in-residence at the Joan Mitchell Arts Center in New Orleans in 2017. I collected food packaging from my fellow artists-in-residence, and from the kitchen where we had daily communal dinners. I took a photo of the weaving and printed it on muslin fabric with their 36” digital printer. I printed two panels, one which I inverted, creating a mirrored image. With this material I made a weaving which I later cut up and embedded in some of the handmade paper artworks

Tomatoes and I (Yellow) from the Kinship Series, 2020

14.5”H. x 11.75”W.

Handmade paper composed of cotton and linen pulp, embedded with sequined lace and discarded food netting; sequin and velvet ribbon, gouache and googly eyes.



Detained Mother and Child, 2021

23.5"H. x 24"W.

Handmade paper composed of pigmented cotton, linen and abaca pulp; painted with pulp-paint; embedded with lace, sequined fabrics and found insect wings; finished with velvet ribbon, ric-rac trim, lace and appliqués.



Sumergida (Submerged), 2003

6"H. x 13"W. x 13"D.

Clay, low fire glaze, acrylic, synthetic hair and soil. Photo by Kevin Noble.

[*Untitled (Green-Yellow)* from the *Latino Farmworkers in the US - Portraits Series*, 2018, and *Untitled (Purple-Yellow)* from the *Latino Farmworkers in the US - Portraits Series*, 2018]. Three years later, when I arrived at The Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling for a one-year residency, my goal was to do something with that fabric.

When I put the two panels together an image of an animal's face or head was revealed, since I had been thinking about Indigenous relationships to nature and their deep spiritual connection with the natural world, I decided to highlight this figure and fully render it. It is for me a very special piece, in part because it was a long and laborious process and because I included materials dear to me, like the crocheted flower that my mom, who passed away eleven years ago, made. A belt at the top of the piece is from the Misak indigenous culture of Colombia, which my mother once gave me as a gift. I wore the belt in my 20s, then never again, but I could not throw it out because I loved it so much. Sometimes, I feel materials choose to come into the work instead of me choosing them, as many of these materials have been with me for many years until they suddenly and unexpectedly make it into the work.

While I was making *Moth(er)*, at Sugar Hill Children's Museum, children would come in during open-studio days and ask "what is that?" They named different animals like a spider, frog, horse, fox, butterfly, moth, and various insects, which I actually see in the piece. I loved the idea that the work represents many animals. I chose *Moth(er)*, because of the play on words, as there is a *motherness* to the piece, but also because I am very fond of moths.



El Sapparro (Canasto)1/ The Basket 1, 2021

35"H. x 27.5"W.

Digitally printed organza silk (created during 2017 Joan Mitchell Foundation Artist Residency, of a discarded food net from food consumed by fellow resident artists), cotton and vintage fabrics; sequin, velvet, satin and lace ribbons; trim, thread, beads, fake and freshwater pearl beads; discarded food nets; seeds and shells from necklaces, previously worn by the artist, purchased or gifted while visiting Colombia and the Caribbean.



Untitled (With Kuna Mola), 2018

40"H. x 48"W. x 5"D.

Concrete, wood, aluminum and acrylic sheeting, polyurethane, acrylic paint, paperpulp, leather scraps, lace, sequined fabrics, fake fur, chains from broken jewelry, found Kuna Mola, Swarovski crystals and beads. Photo by Etienne Frossard.

SR: As a first generation Mexican-American, I struggled to learn about my Indigeneity, and it's always been a learning process. I find through artists' work, it has opened up a lot of doors for me on seeing Indigeneity realized.

LP: For me it started with the materials. I've always had an interest in Indigenous cultures of the Americas and the Caribbean. I was always attracted to Indigenous forms of art, especially textiles, embroideries, and different weaving patterns which I have collected. Some of these textiles I have used in my work since 2007 or earlier. In 2016 when I started the *Latino Farmworkers in the US Tapestries* series, I wanted to include Indigenous textiles of Central America because I wanted to highlight the richness of the ancestry of the farmworkers. Somehow, the Indigenous materials brought me to think about plants and how they are similarly exploited. Learning about Indigenous cultures, I realized they have more holistic approaches to plant cultivation and relating to the natural world, which are deeply spiritual and rooted in a mutual respect between all living beings/species.

Personally as a Colombian-American, it is a very important and empowering part of my own decolonization process to understand the great value of Indigenous knowledge. For me it's also a learning process, although I have great appreciation for Indigenous culture, and as a Mestiza, having Indigenous blood, I didn't grow up with Indigenous culture. How do you reclaim something that was completely denied and repressed through colonization? I believe the arts are an effective way of channeling ancestral knowledge that's still within us, in our DNA, and that we can always tap into. I learn as much as I can, and try to be respectful to the living world around us. And keeping lots of hope, we cannot let go of that.

SR: You mentioned the *Farmworkers Tapestries* series, what led to putting emphasis on farmworkers?

LP: Due to the 2016 anti-immigrant rhetoric that came with the devastating US presidential election, I felt that I needed to do something that highlighted the contributions of Latinx cultures and communities in the US. In 2017, I received a request for a proposal where the theme was *El Sur Latino (The Latin South)*, from the Southern Foodways Alliance, a nonprofit academic organization that studies culture through food. In doing research for this proposal, I realized how marginalized farmworkers in the US were, and how the majority of them are Central American, I decided to propose the *Latino Farmworkers in the US Tapestries* series. The series is composed of seven tapestries, and each tapestry is focused on a different crop from the south of the US. For each tapestry I included the plant, the flower, the pollinators, and the Latinx farmworker as an integral part of the cycle of the plants from the crops. In doing this work, it was revealed that it's not only important to think about the socio-economic issues that farmworkers face, but how the entire unsustainable food and agriculture system needs to be changed. We are exploiting farmworkers, land, and plants. It's a whole system based on exploitation and extraction. We must change it, and we can change it, even though it seems impossible, we will change it. But we first need to change our minds, our way of thinking and seeing.

Untitled (Green-Yellow) from the Latino Farmworkers in the US - Portraits Series, 2018

19"H. x 14.5"W.
Handmade paper composed of pigmented cotton and linen pulp; embedded and finished with sequined fabric, lace and, food packaging nettings and wrappings.





Mēābema IV from the Botánico Series, 2021

(installation variable)
Polyurethane, wood, paint, sequined fabrics, lace, fake fur, leather scraps, rhinestones, fringe, beads, hinges, artificial moss and plants; broken recycled jewelry pieces and chains.





Lithopsia, 2013

14"H. x 4"W. x 4"D.
 Polyurethane and polystyrene foam; concrete, paint, fabric, fiberfill, model trees, rhinestones, notions, beads, chain, leather, cotton thread, acrylic rods, artificial plants and moss.



Highness, 2011

40"H. x 22"W. x 15.5"D.
 Polyurethane foam, wood, resin, clay, paint, fabric, fiberfill, model trees, rhinestones, trims, notions, beads, chain, hardware, cotton thread, acrylic sheet, artificial plants, moss and repurposed furniture.



Sisterhood, 2003

6"H. x 12"W. x 10"D. (Overall arrangement varies)
Clay, acrylic paint and synthetic hair. Photo by Kevin Noble.

Princesita (Little Princess), 2007

20"H. x 20"W. x 15"D. Suspended from ceiling.
Dress, fabric, wire, fiberfill, beads and thread. Interior detail bottom.





“Volcán” (Volcano) from the Agua Viva Series, 2010

17.5”H. x 13”W. x 10”D.

Clay, glaze, resin, beads, rhinestones, urethane foam, artificial foliage and moss; modeling elements, water, water pump and vintage suitcase.



*Flor de mi Abuela
(Grandmother's Flower), 2003*

13”H. x 12”W. x 7”D.

Clay, acrylic paint, copper leaf, wire, artificial flowers, burlap, charcoal and duct tape. Photo by Kevin Noble.



Untitled (Tree and Frame), 2014

57"H. x 38"W. x 5"D.
Concrete, polyurethane foam, reed mesh, wire, paint, fabric, lace, leather, faux fur, artificial moss and plants; gilded frame, chains, broken jewelry, feathers, flocking, Swarovski crystals and beads. Photo by Bill Orcutt.



Cuboid, 2013

31"H. x 11"W. x 6"D.
Polyurethane, polystyrene, concrete, resin, paint, fabric, lace, artificial plants
and moss; beads, trims, plexiglass, furniture legs and steel rods.





Ave del Peritoneo (Bird of the Peritoneum)
 from the *Agua Viva Series*, 2010

16"H x 17.5"W x 15"D.
 Clay, glaze, sequins, Swarovski crystals, appliqués, monofilament, urethane foam, artificial foliage and moss; modeling elements, water, water pump and vintage suitcase.



Naiad, 2012

32"H. x 39"W. x 21"D.
 Polyurethane foam, wood, resin, clay, paint, fabric, fiberfill, rhinestones, trims, notions, beads, chain, hardware, acrylic sheets and bars; artificial plants and moss; and found table.



Blossom/ En Flor, 2006-2010

6'H. x 5'W. x 5'D.

Concrete, iron and glass mosaic.

Permanent, Public Fountain and Sculpture. Modesto Flores Community Garden, Lexington Avenue, between 104th & 105th St. East Harlem, NY. Photo by Rodney Zagury.

Lina Puerta Artist Statement

My work draws from my experience as a Colombian-American artist, examining the relationship between nature and the human-made, and engaging themes of food justice, xenophobia, hyper-consumerism, and ancestral knowledge. I create mixed media sculptures, installations, collages, handmade-paper paintings and wall hangings by combining a wide range of materials, from artificial plants and paper pulp to found, personal and recycled objects. I start a work with concept in mind, but at the actual time of making, I manipulate materials intuitively, responding to the juxtaposition of colors and textures. Experimentation and layering are key to my practice, as I push and play with materials and mediums.

In my early work, I was interested in the female body and seeing it through the lens of nature, free of religious taboos and hypersexualization. These ideas manifested as sculptures of anatomical and botanical hybrids, highlighting their functions and intelligence as wondrous, spiritual and magical. I then began the *Botánico* series in 2010 to explore the tension between the human and botanical worlds. Deconstructing the human control exemplified by artificial plants, I reassembled them to mimic the resilience and seeming chaos of wild plants, sometimes erupting from the gallery walls themselves. At other times I made “contained” works inside suitcases or bell jars that are small ecosystems just like our own bodies. These incorporate lace, sequined fabrics, and jewelry to reference the body, as we are also part of nature and need to reconnect with the celebratory aspect inherent in both nature and ourselves. My next series *Traces* further examined urban landscapes themselves as a collective body, incorporating concrete and tiled surfaces as they evolve with the passing of time.

In 2016 through an artist residency with Dieu Donné, I began experimenting with handmade paper-making, developing a way of layering pigmented paper pulp with various patterned and textured fabrics and then sculpting the surface with water and stencils. Utilizing these techniques, I created the *Latinx Farmworkers in the US Tapestries Series* (2017) which highlighted the extreme physical labor and hardship demanded by exploitative industrial agricultural systems, contrasted against the poetic life cycle of the crops themselves. This naturally evolved into the *Willard Crops Series* of paper collages, in which I turned my focus to the crops, which like the workers who tended them, were subject to pesticides and chemical inputs to maximize profits. Imagining a solidarity between plants and workers, I pushed the sensual and joyous possibilities of the various materials’ forms to create vibrant vegetable portraits to honor the farmworkers for their unsung dedication to plant well-being.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, I began the *Kinship Series* of paper works that emerge from a personal process of reaching out for connection to ancestral indigenous knowledge that inspires a new relationship with plants—not only to the food or medicine they produce—but to their entire bodies and their accumulated wisdom. My most recent works move from paper to fabric, and are inspired by Indigenous weaving patterns related to food and agriculture, passed down across generations of women. I also employ the domestic arts of quilting and embroidery that colonial women would practice together to escape social isolation and seek mutual aid. By integrating these two aspects of my Mestiza ancestry, I seek to uplift undervalued knowledge and recuperate alternative ways of living and relating that can ensure a sustainable and biodiverse future for generations to come.



Untitled (Twig on Tiles #2), 2015

8”H. x 15.8”W. x 2.5”D. (overall measurements)
Cast brass and plated cast iron.

Installation photos



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Hunter East Harlem Gallery
October 13, 2021–February 5, 2022

Curated by Klaudia Ofwona Draber with associate curator Sofia Ramirez

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Cover image: Detail of *Untitled (Turtle 1)*, 2016
28"H. x 16"W. x 2.5"D. Handmade abaca, cotton and linen papers; reused turtle shell, trims, leather scraps, discarded plastic construction net, lace, fake fur, shells from necklaces previously worn by the artist, reused doll eyeballs gifted to the artist by her late mother and recycled food netting. Photo by Nadine Braquetti.

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About KODA

KODA is a new social practice nonprofit arts organization focusing on conceptual mid-career artists ingrained in social justice. KODA offers survey exhibitions as well as tailor-made and community-based artist residencies, through dedicated partnerships with socially engaged partners. The nonprofit serves the community with contemporary art events and outreach to strengthen arts education. In its overall mission to support the artistic and professional growth of artists (mainly women of color), KODA acts as a laboratory for creative concepts, reflecting its core values of curiosity and collaboration.

www.kodalab.org

About HEHG

Hunter East Harlem is a multi-disciplinary space for art exhibitions and socially minded projects. Located on the ground floor of Hunter College's Silberman School of Social Work at 119th Street and 3rd Avenue, the gallery presents exhibitions and public events that aim to foster academic collaborations at Hunter College while addressing subjects relevant to the East Harlem community and greater New York City.

www.huntereastharlemgallery.org

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HUNTER
EAST HARLEM
GALLERY

