

***Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora,  
1990s–Today***

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (MCA)

Curated by Carla Acevedo-Yates

November 19, 2022–April 23, 2023

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**B**eneath strong narrative currents of migration, movement, and exchange, powerful connections between the Caribbean and Chicago pulse within *Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today*. Curated by Carla Acevedo-Yates at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (MCA) and on view from November 2022 to April 2023, the show featured the work of thirty-seven artists associated with diverse countries of the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> Yet allusions to the close ties between the tropical region and the Midwest surface throughout the show in myriad ways. Historically, the Caribbean connection to Chicago has been as integral as the city’s very foundation; its founder, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, was born in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), of French and African descent. This fact, and the vibrant

Caribbean diaspora that forms a part of Chicago’s contemporary cultural landscape—such as the Windy City’s Puerto Rican neighborhood Humboldt Park—are keenly referenced in the show’s formidable catalogue.<sup>2</sup> In the exhibition, further ties were underscored by careful curatorial choices that allowed viewers to draw their own transregional connections. Such an approach was dynamically embodied by the piece that greeted visitors at the show’s entrance by Cuban-born artist Zilia Sánchez, titled *encuentrismo—ofrenda o retorno* (*encounter—offering or return*). In this video work from 2000, the artist tosses one of her paintings, *Soy Isla: Comprendelo y retírate* (*I Am an Island: Understand and Retreat*), into the sea only to see it return to the shore, engaging with diasporic imagery tied to tensions surrounding

movement and displacement. The artist's actions also recall ritual offerings to Yemaya, the Yoruba goddess of the sea. Placed, therefore, within syncretic Afro-Cuban practices, the work nods to the rich African diasporic heritage of the island due to the violence of forced migration by way of the transatlantic slave trade. To the Midwestern viewer, the crashing waves on the shores of Cuba captured in this work also evoked the powerful tides of Lake Michigan, situated only a few blocks from the museum. This curatorial move established a potent visual dialogue between Caribbean and local landscapes and invited reflection on Chicago's own role as an important bridge and migration hub for diaspora communities.

While diaspora served as the exhibition's primary compass, the show also took a strong decolonial stance, challenging Eurocentric narratives of the tropical region. As stated directly in the opening wall text, the show's title underscored that "the Caribbean inaugurated the modern world, and that forms and their aesthetics allow us to analyze the histories and forces that continue to shape our contemporary moment, from emancipation and human rights to colonialism and climate change."<sup>3</sup> This recognition of contact in the Caribbean as the fulcrum of the modern

age was furthered by Colombian artist Álvaro Barrios's poignant critique of colonialism that greeted exhibition-goers in the museum atrium. His *El Mar de Cristóbal Colón* (*The Sea of Christopher Columbus*), first installed at the Paris Biennale in 1971, comprises more than one hundred double-sided silk-screen prints featuring a simple, monochrome square at center. The work was inspired by nautical charts but adopted a minimalist visual language to deconstruct traditional cartography. Installed on clotheslines across the large atrium in a mode recalling the display of *literatura de cordel* (cord literature) in colonial Brazil, the prints packed a powerful symbolic meaning. Cyan cubes on one side produced a wave of color evocative of the Caribbean Sea, while the red on the reverse side alluded to the violent legacy of colonization beneath the surface of exported images of tropical landscapes.<sup>4</sup> The positioning of Barrios's work in this key architectural space served as a reminder to the viewer that the dispersal of people from the region, then and today, has been inherently tied to issues of colonization. It also signaled the framing of diaspora within the exhibition as a state of constant movement and transformation, and the contemporary Caribbean itself as a region of constant flux, despite the static

portrayals found in colonial maps and mindsets.

Moving through the galleries, the viewer encountered themes of Caribbeanness: movement, place, and memory, as well as a temporal emphasis on the 1990s to today. Rather than presenting a linear timeline which would reinforce colonial models, Acevedo-Yates invited us to “think around” the 1990s as a decade in which prominent discourses of identity and difference came to the cultural forefront. This time frame is also recognized as the moment of a critical art exhibition boom in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as a period of increased global interest in the region due to profound political shifts linked to the fall of the Berlin wall and the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, several works on display addressed issues of extraction linked to colonialism in the region. Deborah Jack’s 2022 seven-channel HD video projection, titled *the fecund, the lush and the salted land waits for a harvest... her people... ripe with promise, wait until the next blowing season*, was commissioned by the MCA. Complete with sound and vinyl installation panels, the work juxtaposed vibrant imagery of sea, sky, and tree branches laden with orange pomegranates from the artist’s mother’s home in Sint

Maarten with black-and-white Dutch documentary footage of salt mining on the island from 1948.<sup>6</sup> By draining the color from the paradisaical landscapes to produce a granular image, as well as inverting scenery of the shore, the work both visually references and critiques the Dutch-dominated salt industry, alluding to this mineral’s corrosive nature.

Similarly, Trinidad and Tobago-born artist Christopher Cozier commented on the extractive oil industry of the Caribbean in his two-channel HD video *Gas Men* (2014). Centrally positioned in the exhibition, the piece was shot on the Chicago shoreline of Lake Michigan but completed in Port of Spain, Trinidad. It features the dominating silhouettes of two men clad in business suits spinning gas pump nozzles overhead as if they were lassos and alternately pointing the nozzles at each other in the stance of a Western showdown. This imagery, evocative of American cowboy film iconography, alludes to toxic Western patriarchal structures at play in the neocolonial practices of foreign oil companies in the region. The video is paired with the musical accompaniment of a sitar, which sonically references the mid-nineteenth-century migration of Indian indentured servants to Trinidad to work on sugar plantations.<sup>7</sup> Together,

these elements acknowledge the continued exploitation of people of color on the island.

By alluding to this and other non-Western migration to the region, the exhibition innovatively highlighted the South-South diversity of various diasporas in the Caribbean. The show notably emphasized not only the African but also strong Middle Eastern and South Asian migrant flows into the region, which are so often overlooked. Just as a dialogue surrounding extraction can be seen in the aforementioned video works, various artists throughout the show visibilized diverse migrations by engaging with regionally informed media and material traditions. A case in point was seen in Suchitra Mattai's use of vintage saris to weave her large-scale tapestry *An Ocean Cradle* (2022), which testifies to the histories of South Asian migration to Guyana, as well as Indo-Guyanese migration to North America.<sup>8</sup> Incorporating gendered garments donated by family and friends, the piece activates these fabrics as carriers of memories and movements of generations of women across vast geographies. The work's engagement with knitting, weaving, and embroidery also references and elevates feminized domestic labor, while ghungroo bells, associated with female adornment in classical

Indian dance, are woven into the tapestry to further connote the diaspora's gendered dimensions.<sup>9</sup> In parallel fashion, Kuwaiti-born, Puerto Rico-based artist Alia Farid's *Mezquitas de Puerto Rico* recognizes the legacy of Arab migration to the region by engaging with the Iranian textile tradition of the *kilim*, or prayer rug. The piece, commissioned by the MCA in 2022, forms part of a larger series of work, created by Farid and her collaborator by taking photographs of mosques sponsored by Arab migrants in Puerto Rico, and then sending those images to weavers in Mashhad, Iran, who reinterpreted the imagery while adding their own "signature" embellishments.<sup>10</sup> This contemporary collaboration between Caribbean and Middle Eastern artists established a transregional dialogue that materialized the legacy of the Arab diaspora in the region while fostering South-South solidarities.

Furthering the discussion of diverse migrations in the Caribbean was Cuban-born artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons's 2010 piece *Sugar/Bittersweet*. In this work, the artist alluded to the diasporic legacy of her own Chinese and Nigerian heritage. The installation featured Yoruban spears stacked atop disks of sugar—Cuba's main monoculture export—which vary in shade from refined white to dark

molasses as a symbolic nod to the rigid racialized social structure of the country. The spears themselves were positioned atop Chinese and African stools, alluding to the sugar industry's reliance on and violent exploitation of enslaved Africans and Chinese indentured servants.<sup>11</sup>

Diasporic dimensions that extend beyond geography into the realm of gender and sexual identity were also present in the show. The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres represented queerness and the Cuban diaspora, alongside various other artists, including the aforementioned Zilia Sánchez. Gonzalez-Torres is perhaps best known for his 1991 work *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, a poignant tribute to his partner, Ross Laycock, lost to the AIDS crisis. Notably, this work is visible today at the nearby Art Institute of Chicago. Gonzalez-Torres's pieces in the exhibition, *"Untitled" (North)* and *"Untitled" (Passport)*, also dating to the early 1990s, invited viewers to engage through play and metaphor. The former invited the audience to interact with the string of hanging lights representing a mythical region to the "north," spurring reflection on the Caribbean's positioning within center-periphery global dynamics.<sup>12</sup> In the latter, a folded white paper "passport" allowed the audience to contemplate the freedoms and opportunities

symbolized by both the blank sheet and the document it represents.

Extraordinary for the depth with which it approached themes of diaspora and identity, as well as the notion of the region itself, *Forecast Form* blazed a new path forward for the curation of Caribbean art. The project was striking for its diversity of voices, artists, and agents that comprise the contemporary regional landscape, challenging conventional frameworks to reveal tensions and frictions that remain present due to the legacy of colonization. The exhibition also strategically drove its point home by highlighting its thematic and historical relevance to Chicago as its host city and took advantage of the gallery space's architecture to spotlight key works that provided important theoretical lenses. By considering the complex marginalized diasporic identities and diverse cultural makeup of the region, *Forecast Forum* will leave its imprint on future exhibitions and public discourses tied to the Caribbean and Latin America writ large.

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Colburn, Curatorial Assistant; Isabel Casso, former Susman Curatorial Fellow; and Nolan Jimbo, Susman Curatorial Fellow contributed to the curation of *Forecast Forum* and its catalogue.

<sup>2</sup> Madeline Grynstejn, "Foreword," in *Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today*, ed. Carla Acevedo-Yates, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; New York: DelMonico Books, 2022), 15.

<sup>3</sup> "Gallery Text: Exhibition Introduction," *Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, last modified November 15, 2023, <https://visit.mcachicago.org/exhibitions/art-in-the-caribbean-diaspora-1990s-today/>.

<sup>4</sup> Nolan Jimbo, "Álvaro Barrios," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Carla Acevedo-Yates, "Forecast Form: Reframing the Caribbean through the Mechanics of Diaspora," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 23–25.

<sup>6</sup> Isabel Casso, "Deborah Jack," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Carla Acevedo-Yates, "Christopher Cozier," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Nolan Jimbo, "Suchitra Mattai," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 32, 192–5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> Isabel Casso, "Alia Farid," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 32, 116. Jesús "Bubu" Negrón was Farid's collaborator on the project.

<sup>11</sup> Carla Acevedo-Yates, "María Magdalena Campos-Pon," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Isabel Casso, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres," in Acevedo-Yates, *Forecast Form*, 78.