

Interview with Celina Nogueras, artistic director of the CIRCA Puerto Rico



Celina Nogueras

The surprising strength of Puerto Rican art –surprising with regard to the size of the island– is grounded in the extraordinary quality of its artists and in the important number of high level collectors that can be found there. But this raw material requires professionals able to crystallize a stable cultural structure allowing its future development.

Celina Nogueras Cuevas represents an effort to provide cultural expressions going beyond the market of the island with an own voice. Together with her collaboration with [CIRCA](#) since its first edition, Celina is involved in projects as diverse as **Graphopoli** (Urban Art Biennale) or the Puerto Rico Public Art Project, among others.

This year, as artistic co-director of CIRCA, she is once more in charge of **CIRCA LABS**, a project ranging from graffiti to tattoos that intends to involve the general public in the big week of Puerto Rican art.

AfN: Some days ago Roberto José Nieves (president of CIRCA) stated that the problem with Miami was that it concentrates all its artistic activity in December, and there was nothing left for the rest of the year. Is it the same with Puerto Rico?

The scenario in Puerto Rico is somehow similar, and I believe this applies to all art fairs, in the sense that they are such a powerful driving force that they obviously drag many things with

them. Many of the projects undertaken have to revolve around these events because of the visibility they have.

In Puerto Rico, however, there are other projects. For instance, I have been working earlier this year in the Graphopoli Project, the Urban Art Biennale of the [Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico](#), an event with a huge visibility according to its exposure, both in Puerto Rico and abroad. It was a project involving monumental urban artworks in three municipalities in Puerto Rico, almost from end to end of the island.

But it is true that the layout of the art fairs turn them in driving force of many activities, and they generate some kind of collective euphoria because everyone wants to be a part in them and dress up their Sunday best.

AfN: What is the connection between the Puerto Rican and the American art scenes?

I don't attach much importance to the particular connection between both scenes because I believe that, nowadays, the spokesperson is the World, not necessarily the United States, Europe or Latin America. We live in a global society with immediate access to communications in which artists with similar themes, aesthetics or techniques can interact from anywhere in the world. Obviously, every artist has a cultural heritage and cannot escape from it, but communications grant this opportunity and Puerto Rican artists are as interested in a dialogue with the U.S. as with Europe or Latin America. As I said, the spokesperson is now the world.



AfN: What are the arguments of CIRCA with regard to the excess of art fairs in the schedule?

Each fair should focus in a particular market niche, which is a must today. As we are a small and intimate fair, it seems we cover an important sector; however, some people is no longer interested in being exposed to the monster big fairs often turn into, with 20 parallel fairs that can suffocate the artist; these people prefer a more reduced space, easy to wander around, were you feel you can talk to anyone and get to know everybody,

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where a familiar connexion appears. One of the most important things we offer is less quantity but higher quality and service standards; service in terms of getting to know other people, one to one, of how you interact with the country. Collectors arrange public activities or, alternatively, these smaller activities for these people, they host them at their homes... it is a truly familiar relationship which appears to me as a good alternative. Moreover, it is a fact that Puerto Rico is highly attractive for Europeans, both gallerists and tourists, and we have an important group of collectors here. We have the advantage of the US Dollar (for transactions), the weather, the kindness of our people, gastronomy... All these factors put toward a very interesting and exotic experience for the European public.

AfN: What criteria have you followed in order to select the galleries?

We have analysed the career of the gallery, the fairs in which it has taken part, what artists are included in their programs, what kinds of exhibitions it organises, whether it has connexions or partnerships with museums and different institutions... And the general trend of the fair is focusing in young contemporary art, so artists and proposals should follow this line.

AfN: What may be the impact of CIRCA within the actual economic context? What are the prospects for the current year?

The fair must obviously adapt to the situation: we have reduced the number of galleries by 15% because we prefer to have fewer, but to fulfil their expectations. We have to introduce adjustments, but it is important in order to come out of this difficult year with flying colours. On the other hand, it is very encouraging the fact that the project has gained –and continues to gain– credibility in Puerto Rico: the private sector is more and more committed, there is more and more public interested in visiting the event and we organise training workshops on contemporary art through the year that translate into the creation of new art buyers. We are working on the proposal CIRCA LABS, that ranges from tattoos, clothing painting, live music, styling, clippings... all free of charge, aimed at the general public. We bet on strengthening this area in order to turn CIRCA into a cultural mass event. The idea is to identify our strengths and weaknesses and act accordingly. Next year we will take the step forward and will change the fair to January so as to detach ourselves from other fairs such as [Armory, Chicago](#), [México](#)... Here in Puerto Rico we have a wonderful weather and for many people escaping the cold winter coming to CIRCA is going to be much more appealing.

AfN: The proportional strength of collecting in Puerto Rico has been widely commented; is this stimulating local artists? Is the collector involved with Puerto Rican production, or more focused on the international market?

It is an international collector especially interested in the young Puerto Rican artist. A new generation is taking over the local art scene. Key Puerto Rican artists had barely contact with the international market and context 20 or 30 years ago, and the local market was always their reference. Many collectors supported these artists and created Puerto Rican-only collections. At that time, a new group of collectors appears that start to be trained and visit international art fairs, and purchase works from the international market. As I said, these artists are undergoing a transformation thanks to communications, thanks to their studies outside Puerto Rico, to their social networks... and this young group, which has been working for the last 10 years, is settling in the international market. In the same way, the collector that used to focus in Puerto Rico is now migrating into another point of view, is studying the career of an artist, which has now an international dimension, and those who were mainly interested in the international scene and not so much in Puerto Rico are now interested in supporting the career of this artist of international renown, in buying his or her works and helping him or her to move at an international level. There are two strengths in Puerto Rico at the moment: on the one hand, we produce many artists and, on the other, there are many collectors of renown here, in proportion to our population. But there are also other key factors we need to reinforce: curators, art critics, sponsors, well-known international gallerists... we are working to take these elements to

another level.

AfN: What current Puerto Rican artists would you recommend me not to lose track of?

Among others I can recommend [Enoc Pérez](#), [Melvin Martínez](#), [Miguel Luciano](#), [Bubu Negrón](#)... and among the youngest, Sofía Maldonado, Edgardo Larregui...



AfN: You have mentioned before the section CIRCA LABS, curated by you, focused on public art. As you have pointed, you have also organized Graphopoli, the Urban Art Biennale of Puerto Rico. How would you define "Public Art"?

I worked in the Public Art of Puerto Rico Project, a public project where more than 70 public-art non-ephemeral works (mosaics, sculptures...) were set up. Besides, I have always been especially fond of graffiti and I run Graphopoli, an urban art biennale with works in monumental public spaces. Moreover, I am editor of an architectural review, so I have always been concerned about city planning, public spaces, coexistence spaces and, obviously, about art. There is

Pensum, by **Priscilla Monge**

not a general consent about what is public, and about whether the graffiti is public art or not; this is grounded in many concepts and thoughts about public and private spheres in a time in which we live in Facebook and we do not hesitate to expose our privacy at all times. Here I want to foster works that interact with the public, or works such as skateboarding photographs that reflect an event that takes place in public spaces, because the idea is to capture not only the physical fact, but also the gestures and the different interactions that appear in these public spaces. We have tattoos with people from Miami Inc., which isn't less that something that happens in your skin and has public access... The goal is to defend the idea that public art is not only a matter of public sculptures, but a much broader concept.

AfN: Doesn't the force of public art reside to a great extent in its unpredictable dialogue with the environment? By institutionalizing the graffiti, for example, don't we run the risk of aesthetizing it?

I don't see it that way. To me, a graffitero will always be a graffitero. Graffiti are not only personal comments: they are a comment on the public space, and I think that is its most important strength: it operates on damaged spaces, transition places... but in my opinion moving to authorized places does not affect its strength. It obviously highlights a much more pronounced aesthetic character, that is truth, but I do not see how this limits its strength.

You said something that is very important: one of the strengths of public art and, at the same time, its ultimate intention, is the relation and interaction with the public. We are taking these works to a mall for the first time, where people have another mental predisposition. The idea is

to aim this project not only to the art market, where people can expect it, but also to the public in a mall, that finds the works unexpectedly. It is a pioneer project in Puerto Rico and probably, in some way, anywhere else. It is a completely different project in which many surprises await the audience: this is what good public art should do.

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