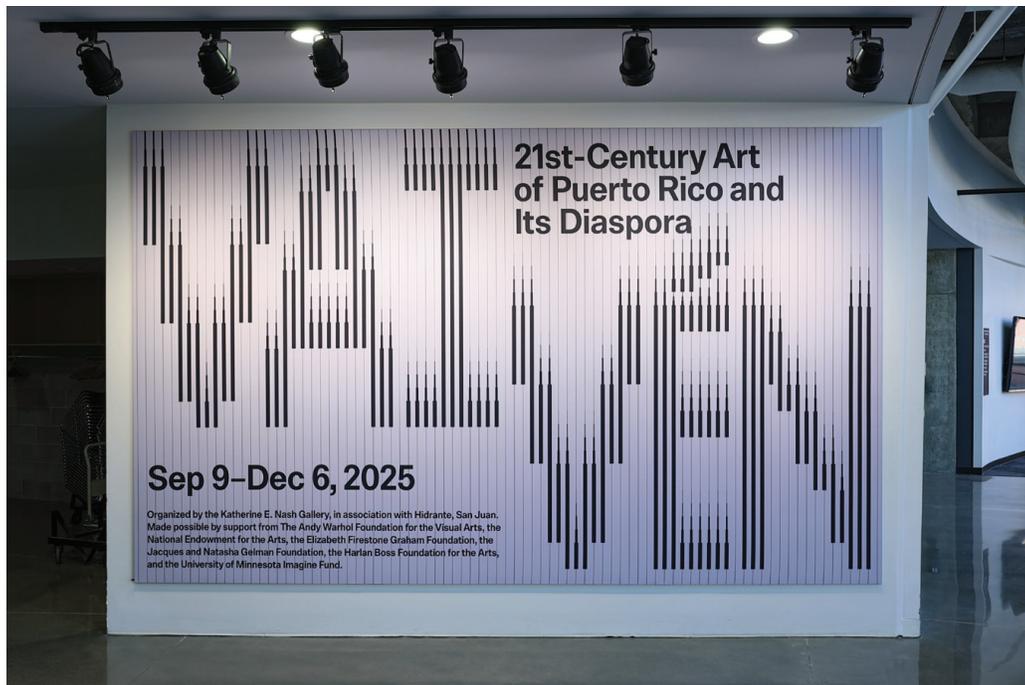


Vaivén: 21st-Century Art of Puerto Rico and Its Diaspora. An Interview with Teréz Iacovino and José López Serra

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Vaivén: 21st-Century Art of Puerto Rico and Its Diaspora. Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, 2025. All images included in this interview belong to the exhibition space.

Vaivén: 21st-Century Art of Puerto Rico and Its Diaspora is a wide-ranging exhibition that brings together more than one hundred works by forty-three artists to examine the fluid, multidirectional nature of Puerto Rican identity across the archipelago and its global diasporas. Curated by Teréz Iacovino (Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota) and José López Serra (Hidrante, Puerto Rico), the project bridges geographies, generations, and aesthetic practices, situating itself within a broader wave of major exhibitions on Puerto Rican art currently emerging across leading institutions in the United States. Expansive in scope yet attentive to the intimate, nonlinear ways culture travels, *Vaivén* challenges fixed narratives of “Puerto Rican art” and opens a conversation about movement, belonging, and artistic possibility. This interview, conducted by Ángel

Antonio Ruiz Laboy (Associate Director of Arts & Culture, CENTRO), explores the curators' collaborative process, theoretical frameworks, and the cultural and political forces shaping this pivotal moment in Puerto Rican artistic production.

Ángel Antonio: What concept of Puerto Rican art are you putting forward in *Vaivén*? In what ways does the inclusion of diasporican art expand or even challenge established narratives of Puerto Rican art?

José: From my position living in Puerto Rico, the idea of “Puerto Rican art” is a bit strange. Here, I do not really think of it as “Puerto Rican art”; it is simply art. Once you leave the island and engage with *Vaivén* in that broader context, you start to understand that it is not just the work we see here. It is part of a worldwide field that gets categorized in specific ways. When you work on the island, the diaspora is not always something you actively encounter. You may not see much diasporican work in local museums or everyday life. For me, *Vaivén* has been about expanding my own notion of Puerto Rican art and of myself as a Puerto Rican artist, understanding that this is not something fixed or confined to the archipelago, but part of a wider, shifting cultural landscape.

Teréz: The impulse to work on this exhibition really came out of ongoing conversations with artists. I felt that something was brewing. Around the time José and I began talking about *Vaivén*, you at CENTRO were launching Diasporican Arts in Motion (DAM), and it felt like there was shared momentum. There was something, almost cosmically, aligning, even if it was just coincidence.



During a studio visit over Zoom, one of the artists in the exhibition, Natalia Lassalle-Morillo, said something that stayed with us: “Puerto Rico is a place that lives outside of itself.” That idea became central. *Vaivén* leans into that diasporic condition while also addressing the gaps left by previous exhibitions. In any field, you start to see the same names recur, whether in “American art” or “Puerto Rican art.” We wanted to ask who gets to represent Puerto Rican art in institutional museums and galleries, and whose work is consistently left out.

We were very interested in bringing together artists who are already recognized within these canons and others who, up until now, might never have had the opportunity to show alongside them. That mattered to us, because we were thinking critically about gatekeeping. This is also why I wanted to collaborate with Hidrante, a non-institutional space that is more responsive to its community and context. Hidrante is not bound by a collecting mission, and the Nash does not have a permanent collection either. Without a mandate to generate ticket sales or uphold a collection policy, we had more freedom to expand what “Puerto Rican art” could mean in this context and to include artists who are not yet widely known.

Ángel Antonio: It is striking that you situate this within a particular moment, probably around 2020. I am wondering whether you see Hurricane María, and the way it brought Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora into closer relation, as a turning point.

Teréz: I think so, absolutely. When we first approached Colectivo Moriviví about a commission, they said something like, “The diaspora took care of us.” That really resonated. In some ways, María functioned as a flashpoint, much like the Vieques struggle did in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Both moments drew the diaspora and the archipelago closer together. I would agree that María marks a significant turning point in that relationship.

Ángel Antonio: The exhibition’s title suggests movement, fluctuation, and return. How do you see *Vaivén* shaping the way we understand Puerto Rican artistic identity across geography?

José: *Vaivén* is an interesting concept because it can describe many different kinds of movement. I will share a small anecdote. I was talking with a friend who had just come back from a residency in the US. While there, part of her cohort includes another diasporican artist. During the introductory session, participants were asked where they were from. She mentions Puerto Rico and adds “from the island.” This sparked a somewhat funny interaction in misunderstanding, as saying you’re from “the island” is read differently in archipelagic PR due to subtle cultural differences between the

San Juan metropolitan area and the more rural municipalities, as well as the separate island municipalities, and now, in the diaspora, between US-based Puerto Ricans and archipelagic-based ones, for example.

For me, it was an interesting interaction to hear when you're from the archipelago, as the "I'm from the island" can mean so many different places. Also, saying someone is "from the island" can be read as implying they are less than you in some ways (the inverse of this is when people say that you're "from la losa" / the tile, which implies that you don't know how to deal with rural life); people can be very sensitive about that positionality.

Even on the archipelago, "Puerto Rico" can mean different things. There is the San Juan metro area, the rest of the nominal Big Island, and Vieques and Culebra. For me, vaivén also describes movement within the archipelago, not only between the archipelago and the continental United States. I am currently based between San Juan and San Germán, in the southwest. Vaivén is the movement between the different parts of the archipelago, then traveling to New York or Minnesota to work on this show, which is interesting when you think about vaivén as movement in time and space. It takes me around two hours to get from San Juan to San Germán, which is more or less the same amount of time that it takes on a plane from San Juan to Miami, and to Vieques, on a ferry, it's more or less the same amount of time as San Juan to New York on a plane, for example.

Understanding that layered movement and fluidity is important. It is part of what has sustained Puerto Rican culture and art. Vaivén helps us think about Puerto Rican identity as something in motion, shaped by internal and external migrations rather than a single fixed location.

Teréz: For me, vaivén is less about a specific geography and more about a psychological or even spiritual condition. One of my favorite works in the exhibition is G. Rosa-Rey's small abstract painting titled "A Region in the Mind." That phrase captures how I think of vaivén as the formation of "place" in nonphysical terms.

Many works in the show deal with memory, belonging, and place in ways that are not tied to a single physical location. I often return to the image of silt, drawn from Aurora Levins Morales's poetry collection *Silt*: silt travels downriver, accumulates, and builds something new. The Mississippi River starts in Minnesota and flows down to the Gulf. Over geologic time, that movement of silt has helped shape islands in the Caribbean.

That is a powerful metaphor for vaivén. It is about movement, accumulation, and the formation of new terrains, whether mental, emotional, or cultural. Even though vaivén sometimes involves physically getting on a plane and moving through space, I tend to think about it as a region of the mind, a non-linear and non-geographic space.

Ángel Antonio: I appreciate how much abstract work you have incorporated, especially given how often Puerto Rican art is framed through familiar symbols and visual languages. Carlos Ortiz Burgos addresses this in his essay, and Abdiel Segarra is also developing an exhibition on diasporican abstraction that expands how we understand Puerto Rican art beyond representational narratives. I would love to hear how you approached abstraction in *Vaivén*, how you curated those works, and why abstraction feels so central to the exhibition's vision.

Teréz: Nayda Collazo-Llorens describes her work in abstraction by saying, "Abstraction serves as a language and method through which to process concepts and sentiments that are otherwise hard to articulate." That line really captures what abstraction does in *Vaivén*. The concept of vaivén itself is complex. It can mean many different things, and abstraction gives us a way to work through that complexity.

We were also mindful of stereotypes and expectations, particularly what Arlene Dávila has written, about how Latinx and Caribbean artists are often pigeonholed into making representational work "about identity." We wanted to resist that expectation. It was important to show a wide range of media and approaches, with both established and emerging artists. The exhibition includes a great deal of abstraction, and to be honest, we could have curated an entire show of Puerto Rican women working in abstraction. There are so many remarkable artists. That is another exhibition waiting to happen.

What often happens, especially in US contexts, is that abstraction by Latinx and Caribbean artists gets erased or sidelined because institutions are looking for work that is explicitly representative of identity, whether figurative or photographic. That kind of work is important and necessary, but we wanted to balance and challenge that expectation. *Vaivén* insists that abstraction is part of Puerto Rican visual vocabularies.

Ángel Antonio: How do you see younger artists engaging with *Vaivén* differently from earlier generations? Each generation has been shaped by distinct historical moments, so I am curious whether you notice shifts in how younger artists approach or interpret Puerto Rican identity today.

Teréz: Some of the youngest artists in the exhibition are in their mid-twenties to early thirties. Colectivo Moriviví told us how excited they were because, when they were studying in Puerto Rico, they had very limited access to diasporican Puerto Rican artists.

I think younger generations are hungry for integration rather than separation. They are less interested in the "dos mundos" framing of being neither here nor there, and more invested in acknowledging that all of these locations and experiences exist at once and need to be present in

the work. We tried to move away from binaries such as “island versus mainland” in *Vaivén*. Whether we fully succeeded or not is something that time will show, but that was a guiding intention.

José: For me, this is also tied to questions of migration and artistic success. After María, many of my friends left for the United States. Even before that, when I was at the University of Puerto Rico and had friends at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas, there was always a sense that if you wanted to “make it” in the arts, you needed to get an MFA, which meant leaving the island.

There is no big MFA program here. So there was an informal pipeline from UPR to places like SAIC in Chicago. If you were a painter, you went there for your masters, because that was where other Puerto Ricans were and where you could become part of a larger conversation. That shaped an idea of success that depended on leaving.

As I think about younger artists now, I see them questioning that model and asking what it means to participate in a broader artistic conversation while remaining based on the island. They are negotiating success in more complex ways.

Ángel Antonio: What is your own experience with the vaivén and Puerto Rican identity?

José: I have been traveling regularly to New York over the years. I do this partly to maintain a sense of connection and not feel limited to one geographic context. I recognize the privilege that allows me to move between places relatively easily.

For me, engaging with the diasporic experience means knowing the people, seeing the references, and understanding the dynamics, even though I am not living in the United States full-time. It is a way of participating in that broader field while remaining rooted in Puerto Rico.

Teréz: For me, as I mention in the acknowledgments, my relationship to my Puerto Ricanness is marked by estrangement. *Vaivén*, in that sense, is psychological. I wanted to learn about my family by learning about art, because that was the access point I had to Puerto Rican culture and history.

I also knew that I wanted to work with someone whose experience was very different from mine, which is why collaborating with José was so important. I do not think you could find two more different positions of being Puerto Rican. That difference is exactly what I wanted. There were many things I did not know, or had to unlearn, that I could only access by working with someone embedded in Puerto Rico in the way José is. He has really fought to stay on the island and has built a strong community there.

Our Warhol Foundation curatorial research grant allowed us to visit artists both in the archipelago and in the diaspora. For instance, it indirectly supported a two-person show José curated with Juanita Lanzo and Elizabeth Robles, which I saw as a small encapsulation of what the research could generate. In many ways, *Vaivén* wanted to do more of that: to bring our different strengths and positions together. The project would look very different if we were both working within large museum institutions, or if we had both been born and raised on the island. Its strength lies, in part, in how different we are and what each of us brings as a person.

Ángel Antonio: That leads me to a question about the theoretical and intellectual frameworks behind the exhibition. But José, I also want to speak to you as a practitioner, as someone who has been building *Hidrante* for several years, navigating not only the conceptual terrain but also the day-to-day realities, relationships, and community work that shape your practice. With that in mind, what frameworks guided the conception and organization of this exhibition?

José: Early on, one of our concerns was not to reproduce the trauma-centered narrative that had become common in exhibitions about Puerto Rican art, especially after *María*. We saw a wave of shows centered on disaster, hurricanes, and resilience. There were important exhibitions like *no existe un mundo poshuracán...* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and we learned a great deal from them. But we also wanted to move against that grain.

We asked ourselves how to avoid making a show that could be reduced to a linear narrative starting with Vieques, then 936, the 2008 housing collapse, #RickyRenuncia, *María*, the Fiscal Control Board, and so on. Those events matter deeply, but we did not want *Vaivén* to be a single didactic timeline of crisis and struggle.

This connects to abstraction. If Puerto Rican art is defined primarily through figurative representations of disaster and identity, where does that leave abstract work? How do you “abstract” disasters? That question pushed us to look for different narrative structures, ones that were more intergenerational and inclusive of second and third generation diasporican artists. We wanted to resist a very narrow story and instead create a broader, layered field.

Ángel Antonio: I love hearing that, because it is important for us to move beyond certain established narratives. It was exciting to see how this exhibition opens up and expands those conversations.

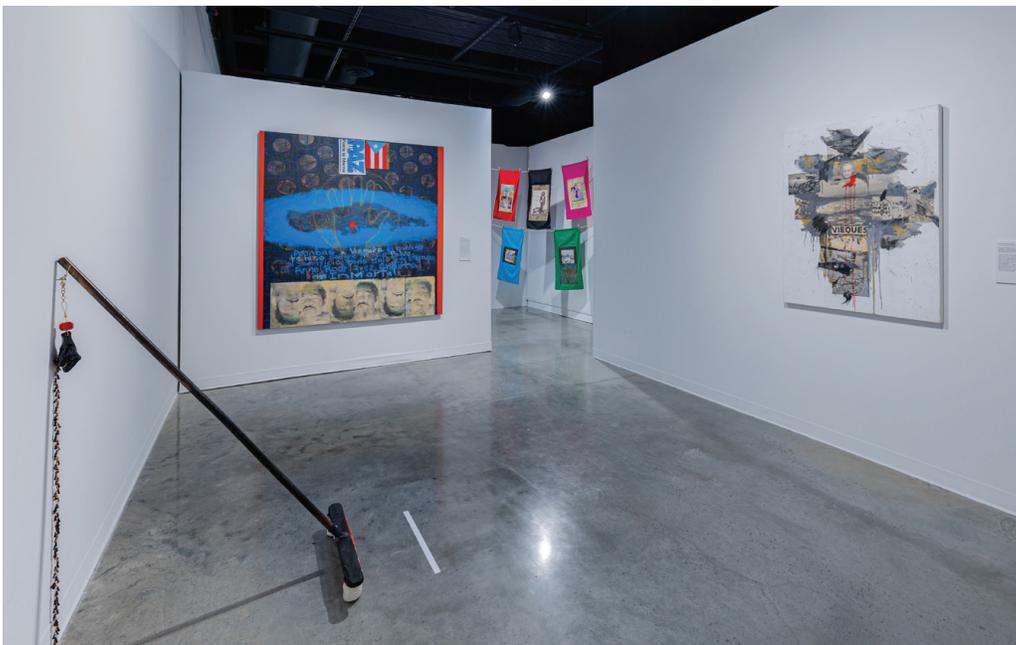
Teréz: It is not that there are no works in the exhibition that touch on or acknowledge María; there are. But we did not want María to be the central organizing principle. *No existe un mundo poshuracán* was so necessary and we learned so much from it, especially from the programming and research that challenged the simplistic narrative of resilience.

In *Vaivén*, we wanted to consider other ways of approaching disaster. Ricardo Cabret's work is a good example: it abstracts disaster and contends with María in a non-literal way. Going back to Nayda's formulation, abstraction can make it possible to talk about very difficult, painful subjects in ways that feel more accessible and less isolating.

We wanted to include works that engage disaster without being defined by it and to encourage thinking about disaster beyond photographic documentation or salvaged artifacts. *Vaivén* opens space for those other approaches.

Ángel Antonio: And it is not only about natural disasters. You also included works that reference places like Vieques and other forms of struggle. But when you look at the catalog, those themes do not appear as the core focus. It is not framed as an exhibition about Puerto Rican struggle.

José: Exactly. Early on, we did ask ourselves whether we wanted to build a very time-bound narrative: starting in 2000 with Vieques, then moving through all the major events you mentioned. We could have done that and produced a very didactic show. But we decided that we did not want *Vaivén* to be "one story" about Puerto Rican struggle.



Teréz: The works we chose that reference specific events, like Vieques or the Garbage Offensive, often do so at the intersection of archipelago and diaspora. The piece about Vieques is one of the oldest in the show if we take 2000 as a rough starting point, but the exhibition also looks further back.

José: Yes. We include works by artists like Nitza Tufiño, which speak to the 1970s and 1980s. Any conception of Puerto Rican art and diaspora has to contend with more than a century of US occupation. That historical backdrop is always there, even if the exhibition itself is not strictly chronological.

Teréz: We also include work by artists such as Shellyne Rodriguez, who addresses the Young Lords' 1969 Garbage Offensive. We wanted to bring together histories from both the archipelago and the diaspora and show how they are intertwined.

Ángel Antonio: In her catalog prologue, Arlene Dávila describes a “Vaivén-rican renaissance” and traces its genealogy back to the Nuyorican Poets Café. Does your curatorial research affirm, complicate, or expand that lineage? In other words, through your work on the exhibition, did you encounter other movements, spaces, or historical moments that contribute to, question, or broaden that genealogy?

José: One of the most interesting parts of our research was traveling to Chicago for Carla Acevedo-Yates's exhibition on Puerto Rican art there. We saw how a center dedicated to the Puerto Rican experience in Chicago connected migration histories from agricultural fields in New Jersey to urban communities in Chicago. Families moved, settled, and organized, and those stories are deeply tied to broader struggles around labor, housing, and racial justice.

We also visited Puerto Rican centers in Philadelphia, Buffalo, and Rochester. It became clear that the narrative of Puerto Rican cultural life cannot be anchored only to one “mythical” place like the Nuyorican Poets Café. That model has been repeated, in different forms, across many cities.

In a more contemporary sense, if we think about an equivalent to the Nuyorican Poets Café, I might point to spaces like Toñita's in New York, which holds together community, culture, and memory. It is another site of vaivén.

Ángel Antonio: You mentioned Nitza's work and its roots in the 1960s and 1970s human rights movements, when Puerto Ricans were very active through the Young Lords and other formations. Some people argue that there was already a vibrant Rican renaissance happening then.

José: Yes, and what strikes me is that here in Puerto Rico there is very little recognition of the Young Lords. When you are taught Puerto Rican history in school, it is framed almost entirely within the archipelago. Migration and diaspora struggles are not integrated into that narrative.

Through the research for *Vaivén*, it became clear that a more comprehensive and inclusive account of Puerto Rican history has to include these movements and spaces outside the island. Historians like Jorell Meléndez-Badillo are doing important work along those lines. The focus is not solely on independence struggles, but on the many different ways Puerto Ricans have organized and resisted over time.

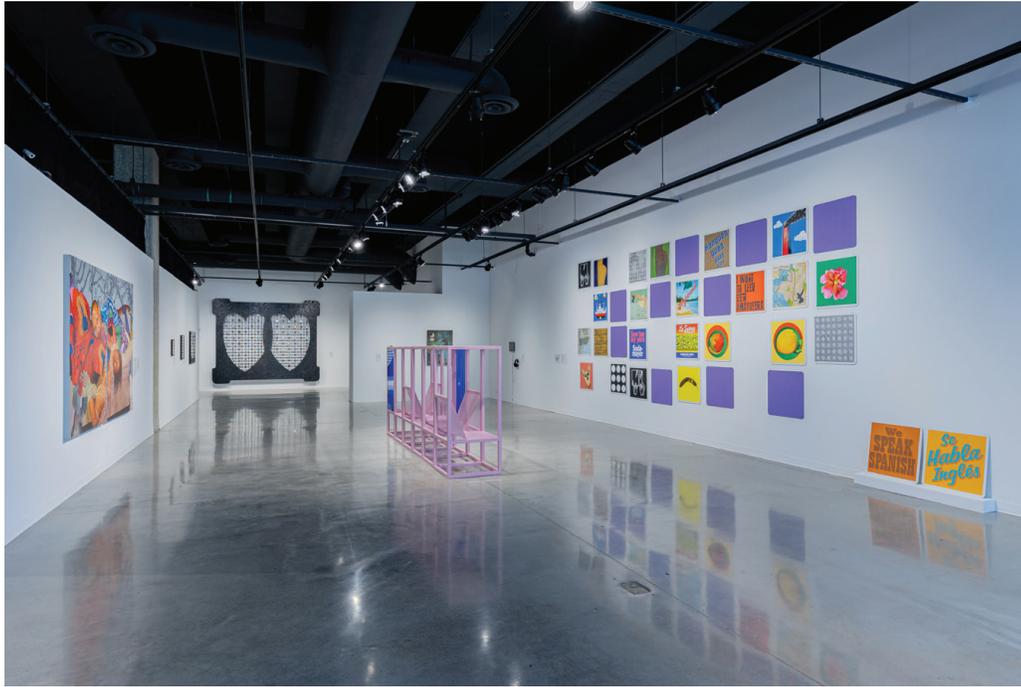
Teréz: People also do not think of places like Minnesota as sites of Puerto Rican history, yet they are. Someone adjacent to this project, Tabatha Cruz, who was a CENTRO fellow in 2022, researched Puerto Rican migration to Minnesota and found that it dates back to the late nineteenth century, to cities like Duluth.

In places where Puerto Ricans are not the majority Latinx population, their histories are deeply entangled with other communities. For example, Ricardo Levins Morales has been in Minnesota since the early 1970s and co-founded the Northland Poster Collective, which is part of a broader radical printmaking and organizing tradition.

Vaivén acknowledges that every artist in the show is of Puerto Rican descent and connected to Puerto Rican arts and culture, but it also insists that these histories are not isolated. We have artists who identify as Mexi-Rican, like Nitza, or Costa Rican and Puerto Rican, like GeoVanna Gonzalez. The exhibition foregrounds Black and Caribbean knowledge within Puerto Rican arts, which is often pushed to the margins.

Ángel Antonio: I love that, because it suggests that Puerto Ricans have also been participating in other organizations and movements that might appear under broader labels like “Latino” or “American art.” Their contributions may not always be recognized as Puerto Rican, even when they have been central to those histories.

Teréz: Exactly. In Minnesota, for instance, the most visible Latinx population is of Mexican descent, but Puerto Ricans are the second largest Latinx community, just smaller in number. That affects how histories are told and who is visible.



Ángel Antonio: How do you situate *Vaivén* in relation to previous exhibitions of Puerto Rican and diasporican art? Are there particular continuities or ruptures that stand out?

Teréz: Exhibitions like *entre horizontes* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago or *Puerto Rico Negrx* at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico are important precedents. Quite a few artists who appeared in those shows also appear in *Vaivén*. I think we were interested in both building on those histories and breaking away from certain labels and framings that have become too rigid.

José: For me, *Vaivén* is the first exhibition I have seen that has a truly ontological scope. It is not organized around a single theme like Puerto Rico and Chicago, or Puerto Rico and María, or Puerto Rican abstraction. We have seen those more focused shows, and they are valuable, but *Vaivén* tries to hold many dimensions at once. In that sense, it broadens the conversation rather than narrowing it to a single lens.

Ángel Antonio: With forty-three artists and over one hundred works, the exhibition takes on an almost anthological scope. Was this breadth intended as a kind of survey or canon-building gesture, and how did you navigate the responsibility of representing such a wide field?

Teréz: We might still be in shock. We were finishing labels and details as we were having some of these conversations. As a curator, you always worry: will people think the show is too broad or unfocused? But I think that breadth is also its strength. We were not trying to pin down one specific genre, historical moment, or political position.

Instead, we were interested in the hybridities that *Vaivén* reveals in the work of Puerto Rican artists, whether they are in the archipelago or in the diaspora. The exhibition allowed us to form new visual connections between artists who had never met and might not even be aware of each other, yet whose work resonates formally or conceptually.

Navigating the responsibility of representation meant asking: Who have we not seen? Who has not been brought to the forefront or written about in catalogs like this? Some artists, like Elizabeth Robles, have not shown extensively outside Puerto Rico. We wanted to take risks and offer a platform to artists who have not always had one, because we believe deeply in their work. That is one way we approached the responsibility: by not relying solely on what has already been validated.

José: I felt a responsibility to show artists who have been underrepresented, and not only those in my immediate circle. Being based in Puerto Rico, I have many friends and colleagues in the arts, but *Vaivén* could not simply be a show of “my friends.” It includes artists I met years ago and have continued to follow, even when they moved away from traditional art centers.

Take someone like Estrella Esquilín, whom I first met during a walking seminar with Beatriz Santiago Muñoz in 2014. She was born in Kansas City and now lives in Arizona. There are artists like her working in what is often called “a flyover state,” outside New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. *Vaivén* asks us to consider how the canon is shaped by geography and to pay attention to artists working in places that are not automatically seen as central.

Ángel Antonio: How do you think this project shifts the conversation for future curatorial work? How did your collaboration shape the final form of the exhibition?

Teréz: We both took a significant risk with each other. We had never met in person. As I write in the preface, our collaboration began through an Instagram message, a very digital vaivén.

I am tied to a university gallery, but we do not have the same kind of support or constraints as a large museum. We do not have a collection to uphold, and our exhibitions are free and open to the public. Because of that, we can take risks that other institutions might avoid. We are not beholden to ticketing mandates or certain attendance goals.

I hope *Vaivén* encourages more resourced institutions to work more closely and more horizontally with community spaces. Our collaboration with Hidrante is an example of what can happen when you build a project from mutual trust. We did not know how it would turn out, and we had a lot to lose in different ways, but we committed to the process.

José: For me, it was also a question of how far I was willing to go in trusting this process. I accepted a message from someone I did not know, put my name on a proposal, and then we actually received the grant. Suddenly it became very real. When I went to Minnesota a couple of months before the opening and saw the physical catalog for the first time, it felt like a shock. What had existed on my laptop screen as a PDF was now a substantial book.

My way of working has always been close to the “just do it” philosophy. If I waited until every condition was perfect, with all the funding and institutional support in place, I would not be doing what I am doing now. Meeting people like Michy Marxuach from Beta Local was formative. When I asked how she started, she simply said, “I just did it.” That approach shaped Hidrante and also shaped how I approached this project.

Teréz: Both of us come from artistic practices as makers, and that influences how we think about curating. We see exhibition-making as a creative process in itself, involving conceptual thinking, design, and collaboration. The Warhol Foundation’s curatorial research grant was crucial. It allowed us to physically move through the *vaivén* we are talking about, visiting artists in different locations, and building the show from those encounters.

José: For me, when I heard we would have funding to travel to places like Los Angeles, I thought, “I have always wanted to go there, so let us do it.” As an artist running a space, I also think of exhibitions as creative projects. *Vaivén* involved many aesthetic decisions: how the show is organized, how it looks, how the catalog is designed. Curatorial practice, in that sense, is another mode of making.



Ángel Antonio: The exhibition is staged in Minnesota, a place marked globally by the murder of George Floyd and the urgent conversations on race and equity it catalyzed. How does *Vaivén* intersect with these local and global conversations on race, justice, and representation?

Teréz: Minnesota is geographically central, a kind of bridge between east and west. It is also the headwaters of the Mississippi River, which connects to the Gulf and, in a larger sense, to the Caribbean. That geography resonates with the idea of *vaivén* radiating outward to form many constellations.

At the same time, the exhibition is deeply concerned with race and the erasure of Blackness within narratives of Puerto Ricanness. María Elena Ortiz writes about various forms of colorism in Puerto Rico and about the way people become racialized differently once they move to the United States.

We also thought a lot about what she and Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez have discussed regarding the “trifecta” of African, Indigenous, and Spanish ancestry. We often narrate this as a harmonious balance, but in practice Spanishness is privileged and African and Indigenous heritages are pushed down. We asked ourselves who has historically represented Puerto Rican art in American and global art canons. Often, those figures are white-presenting male Puerto Ricans.

We wanted to foreground artists and histories that challenge that erasure, particularly Black, Afro-diasporic, and Caribbean knowledge that has often been sidelined.

José: I agree. It is important to recognize that conversations about race are shaped differently in different places. The first time I felt directly racialized as a body was in New Orleans in 2017, when I was speaking Spanish to my mother on the phone and a group of white people told me to “go back to your country.” I am a US citizen, I was in the United States, and yet in that moment I was positioned as foreign.

Experiences like that filter into how we think about Puerto Rican identity and diaspora and how those identities are perceived in different contexts. *Vaivén* is very much situated at the intersection of those conversations, especially in a place like Minnesota where the global debate around race and police violence has been so visible.

Ángel Antonio: Your experience mirrors that of Puerto Ricans who do not speak Spanish and then feel discriminated against when they visit the island. Spanish, as part of that “trifecta” of identity, becomes a gatekeeper. If you do not meet that linguistic standard, you are not “Puerto Rican enough.” Language becomes a kind of password to belonging. That is why I appreciate projects like “Puerto Rican Passport” by Adál Maldonado and Pedro Pietri. I also appreciate that the catalog and, I imagine, the exhibition embrace bilingualism.

Teréz: The catalog is fully bilingual, and all of the didactic materials will be accessible bilingually, at least via phone if not always in print. We were very intentional about that.

One video work by Melissa Calderón speaks directly to what you are describing. It shows her and her mother singing “Isla del Encanto.” As she struggles with the Spanish lyrics and pronunciation, her image gradually disappears. There is a palpable sense of shame in the performance. As someone who is not fluent, I recognize that I will often be read as a gringa, and that tension is very present in the exhibition.

José: I was put through private school with the clear message that I had to learn perfect English, without an accent, because that would open doors. For my parents’ generation, success meant that their children would pass as American, get good jobs in the United States, and likely move away from the island.

Earlier generations of Puerto Ricans who migrated without speaking English suffered harsh discrimination. In our generation, you see an inversion: you go back to Puerto Rico and may feel judged for not having “perfect” Spanish. In reality, we mostly speak Spanglish, and language is already hybrid. There is no pure Spanish here, but there are still powerful expectations attached to both languages that shape who is seen as fully belonging.

Ángel Antonio: How does the exhibition connect to previous programming at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery?

Teréz: About ten years ago, the Nash organized an exhibition of Ana Mendieta's films curated by Howard Oransky and Lynn Tijernan Lukkas. That show was pivotal for me. I knew Mendieta's work, but not her film practice. Encountering her as a diasporic Cuban artist working with film opened a path for me to engage more deeply with Latinx and Caribbean art and diaspora.

In many ways, *Vaivén* builds on that legacy. The gallery has worked with a range of Latinx artists, but the Mendieta exhibition was a turning point for me personally. Many of the themes we are grappling with in *Vaivén*, such as language discrimination, racialization, longing, and uprootedness, also appear in her work. *Vaivén* extends and complicates those conversations through a specifically Puerto Rican and diasporic lens.

Ángel Antonio: Given the current political climate around migration, the exhibition you started working on several years ago is now entering a very different context. How do you imagine it will be received, and has this climate shifted any aspects of the exhibition?

José: I have had many conversations about citizenship and migration in relation to Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans migrate under a very particular legal framework. You buy a ticket, show your ID, and move. Your experience is not the same as that of migrants who must navigate borders, visas, and the threat of detention.

At the same time, Puerto Rico is now seeing an increase in anti-immigrant discourse that did not exist in the same way before. Migration has long been present here, but it is being politicized differently now. Meanwhile, Puerto Rican citizenship itself remains contingent on federal law, such as the Jones-Shafroth Act. If that legal framework were ever revoked or radically changed, our status could shift overnight.

There is not enough public discussion of how migration has been used as a tool of dispossession, both on the island and in relation to the diaspora. All of that forms part of the background against which people will encounter *Vaivén*, even if it is not the explicit focus of the show.

Ángel Antonio: And with recent developments around militarization in Puerto Rico, including renewed activity around Vieques, some of these themes become newly relevant.

José: Exactly. There was a massive movement to remove the Navy from Vieques. Yet now, as we speak, we see military exercises and deployments

again. It raises the question of what has truly changed and what remains structurally intact. It brings back memories of protest and resistance and forces us to ask whether those victories were permanent or partial.

Teréz: We also have a related exhibition in our smaller gallery titled *Walking Bridges*, which features newly acquired Latinx and Caribbean books, catalogs, zines, and printed matter. One of the works in that show is the Exit Art portfolio “Illegal America,” which feels uncannily current given today’s debates about borders and legality.

That portfolio includes contributions by artists such as Papo Colo, who co-founded Exit Art. Even though it is more than thirty years old, it could have been made for this moment. Much of the printed matter in *Walking Bridges* addresses language, borders, and migration, themes that echo throughout *Vaivén* as well.

I imagine that some viewers will receive the exhibition differently because of the current climate. Works like those by Bibiana Suárez, which address stereotypes of Latinos in the United States, or Gisela Colón’s work, which links gun violence to bodily vulnerability and landscape, may resonate in powerful ways, especially in places like Minnesota that have experienced recent traumas around violence.

We cannot know exactly how *Vaivén* will be received. The context continues to shift rapidly. But I am confident that there will always be a thread or connection that speaks to the urgencies of the present, no matter how you enter the exhibition.