

EDDRA
SOTO
GRAFT

A Reflection on Viewing Maria

Dalina A. Perdomo Álvarez

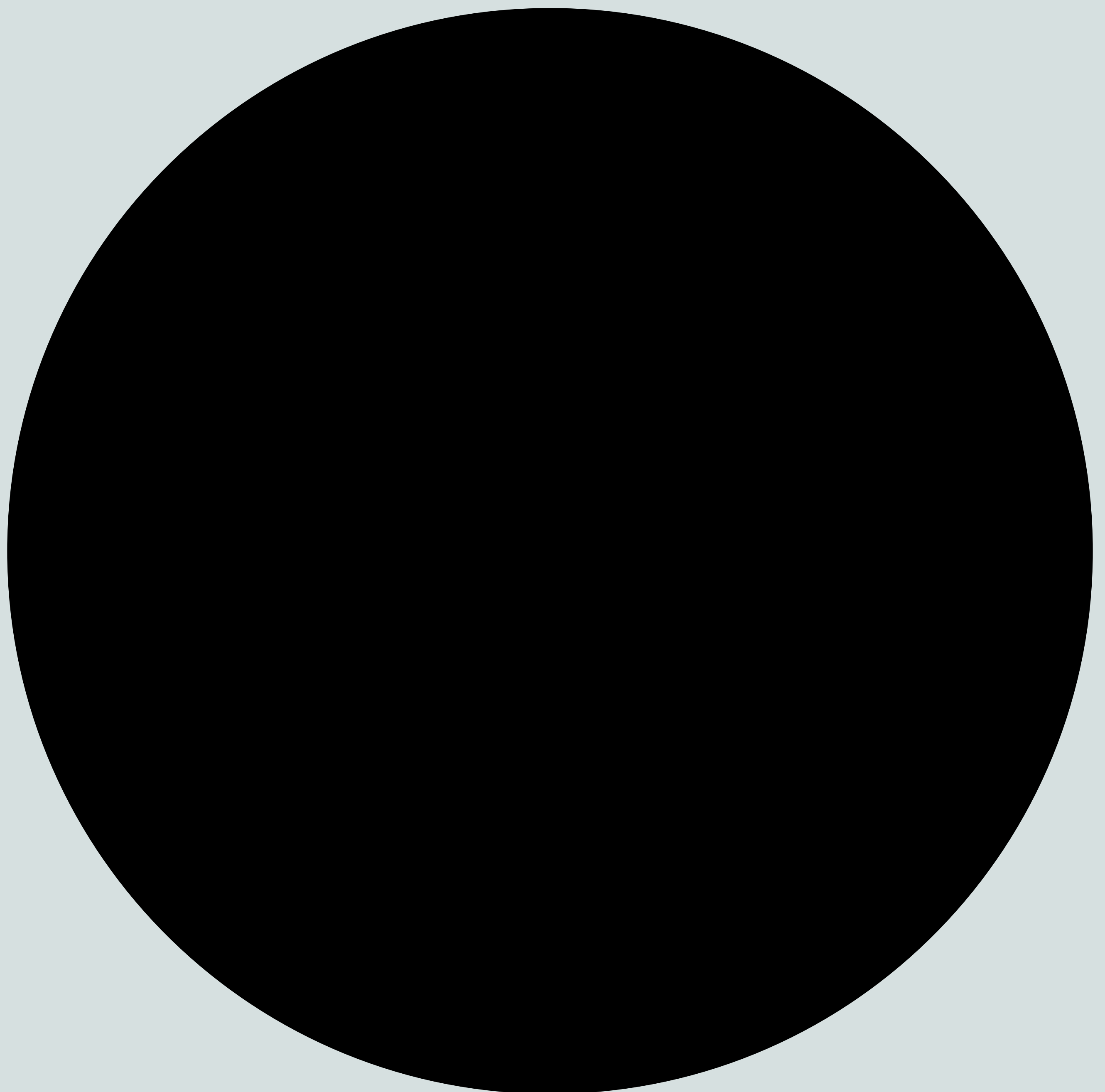
Mirror Displacements

Robert R. Shane

More than Fences: *GRAFT* and Adinkra

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● **A Reflection on Viewing Maria**

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Between dark and daylight, a flurry of images of an island no longer recognizable circulated online, primarily via news coverage. First, landfall. Slanted palm trees and utility poles, greens and blues turned to gray, houses peeling away. Then, the aftermath. The areas that were not inundated by water were flooded by people surveying the damage to their homes—both the individual structure and the collective land.



Broadcast media coverage of Hurricane Maria, 2017.
Photograph by Edra Soto.



Hurricane Maria visibilized Puerto Rico in the way only destruction and tragedy can. The documentation of the human experience of such a traumatic event, however, brings up questions of ethics in photography. Is it right to photograph people in their most vulnerable moments? What do we achieve in showing “the world” the “reality” of a situation? Is it worth the risk of sensationalizing suffering?

While we may think of the larger impact media coverage achieves in situations like this, it serves another purpose for people in the diaspora. Predominantly, it induces survivor’s guilt and a particular feeling of impotence. During Maria, Puerto Ricans on the other side of the *charco* could survey the damage from afar while they were unable to communicate with their friends and relatives, some not hearing anything directly from them for days or weeks. Days went by scrolling and swiping through screens, searching for a glimpse of familiar faces along the sunken, toppled, roofless houses turned inside out, set on open spaces where the surrounding vegetation



appeared to have vanished into thin air.

Meanwhile, people on the island were confronting the candid reality, the one no form of documentation can ever truly capture. Living after it seems like the world has ended. The in-between of the oft pictured debris and wading through floodwaters. This is not to say there is a complete divide between the photographers and the photographed—many of the images that circulated were taken by residents, and in some instances the photojournalists documenting on behalf of news outlets or independently were residents themselves. What does it feel like to encounter those images later on, even five years later?

Edra Soto's *GRAFT*, an ongoing architectural intervention modeled after *quiebrasoles* (ornamental concrete blocks that provide shade from the sun) and *rejas* (wrought iron screens that serve as protective barriers on homes) incorporates images of Puerto Rico into viewfinders inserted into the piece. In most iterations, the images were of varying



subjects, but in this version, Soto specifically uses photographs she took during Hurricane Maria on her smartphone. She has described the participatory aspect of looking through the viewfinders as intending to be an act similar to “peering through the *quiebrasoles* and *rejas* surrounding a Puerto Rican home to glimpse a small portion of the home behind the walls, challenging ideas of privacy.” In narrowing it down to Maria respectively, the act is transformed into something more personal. For visitors who have experienced Maria, or any natural disaster, it may be a welcome option to be able to choose whether to look at these images and have to relive that story in a gallery space. As such, the *rejas* and *quiebrasoles* that generally function as a defensive and exclusionary devices become a safe space for looking. Because the design of these protective barriers is so ubiquitous to the visual culture of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean at large, the familiarity of the object in a gallery space, especially one foreign to the island, invites Puerto Rican



visitors to enter and look, rather than keep away.

This visual familiarity also invokes another aspect of Soto's piece to which its title alludes, migration. Though she was coincidentally on the island when the hurricane happened, Soto has been based in Chicago for many years. The title *GRAFT* thus refers to the experience of being transplanted from one place to another. This facet of the project also takes on a deeper meaning in the wake of Maria and the mass migration to the United States that occurred afterward, largely due to the federal government's response (or lack thereof) to the force majeure.

The impact of the storm was so great that it changed the island's temporal vernacular: there is "before Maria" and "after Maria." But really, Puerto Rico is still in the midst of repercussions of a post-Maria time. Because of tax incentives offered to US-based American citizens to relocate to the unincorporated territory, resulting in a real estate boom on the island orchestrated by hedge fund

vultures, Puerto Ricans are again being driven out by factors they cannot control. In this context, protecting one's home also takes on a different meaning when viewing this work.

The phenomenon of the ecological horror spectacle is, of course, not unique to Hurricane Maria and Puerto Rico, and it certainly goes back to the early history of photography. There were several attempts at photographing tornadoes in the late 1800s: the Johnstown Flood of 1889 was one of the first widely captured natural disasters, and the photographs of the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 even included shots of bodies amidst the devastation. A tendency toward image overload is not a new concept to our society either; the digital world has certainly made it easier, but the foundation was initially laid by mass media. The hope is that, through looking at art, we can become more thoughtful and respectful viewers.



Dalina A. Perdomo Álvarez (she/her) is a Puerto Rican curator and writer. She is currently the Curatorial Assistant at the MSU Broad Art Museum. Previously, she was the 2021 Inaugural Curatorial Fellow at the Chicago Underground Film Festival, the 2018-2020 Curatorial Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, and has also worked at the Video Data Bank and The National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture. She received her BA from the University of Puerto Rico - Mayagüez, and her MA in Cinematic Arts (Film Studies) from The University of Iowa.

● Mirror Displacements

Robert R. Shane

At eye level throughout Edra Soto's *GRAFT*, circular mirrors fitted within the concrete blocks of the artwork's quiebrasol pattern reflect the museum space behind me, displacing it so it appears both within and beyond the work's flat plane in front of me.



Edra Soto, *GRAFT*, 2019 (detail, *Forgotten Forms*, Chicago Cultural Center, February 2–April 7, 2019). PVC, latex enamel paint, aluminum frames, viewfinders, and inkjet prints, 14 x 38 x 6 ft. (4.3 x 11.6 x 1.8 m). Photograph by Kaitlyn Albrecht.



There is an opening in the center of each mirror, like a peephole in a door. I move closer to one mirror and see my face reflected. Positioning my head so one eye looks in the hole, I see more quiebrasoles inside: a photograph of Soto's source material, decorative concrete fences in situ around Puerto Rican homes which I now view from over a thousand miles away.

But to really see the photograph without distraction, I must close one eye and look with the other. Once I do, I still see my face in the mirror but can no longer see my seeing eye. It is missing, replaced by the photograph of the quiebrasol. I have never looked in a mirror and not been able to see myself looking back at me. It is disconcerting! As a viewing subject, I am displaced.

Because the mirror is equidistant between me and the photograph, my reflection and the circular image at its center (which has replaced my seeing eye) come into focus simultaneously as I observe them. The photograph is grafted onto my eye.



Storm-ravaged landscape in Cupey, San Juan, Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, 2017. Photograph by Edra Soto.



I look into other mirrors. I see a television set. I see an elder woman wrapped in a sheet in her bedroom. Am I invading her privacy? I see an airport hallway where there hangs a tourism poster for Puerto Rico featuring an image of the Spanish sentry box La Garita—signifying a colonial history that had been visible but unseen. I see a devastated landscape in the aftermath of María.

These are the artist's own photographs, a record of what Soto, as a seeing subject, saw looking through the viewfinder of her camera. They reflect on the subjects of her work: belonging, history, and home. In the displacement of myself, the artist's subjectivity is grafted onto mine.

Robert R. Shane is Associate Curator at the University Art Museum, Albany, NY, and a frequent contributor to *The Brooklyn Rail*. He received his PhD in Art History & Criticism from Stony Brook University.

● More than Fences: *Graft* and Adinkra

Adia Sykes

There is something strikingly familiar about the forms Edra Soto's *GRAFT* takes. Be they within the decorum of a gallery setting or a public space, the structures resonate with an architectural vernacular in which a viewer can find a semblance of some recognizable structure like bus stops, walls, screens, fences, and other domestic architectures. In fashioning these interventions Soto often pulls from a visual rhetoric that is commonplace in her native Puerto Rico.



Breeze block wall at the San Gerardo gated community, Cupey, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2021. Photograph by Edra Soto.



As an ongoing project, *GRAFT* remains a multifaceted series exploring seemingly dichotomous concepts such as: Puerto Rican vernacular architecture and international site specificity, historical research and personal experience, and passive observation and active participation. The emphasis on the circle and flora motif in this iteration is a query into the common understanding of the West African traditions present in Puerto Rico's architecture.

While pattern has been present in the previous iterations of *GRAFT*, this one in particular moves to the fore a certain visual component with intention. Soto sourced the motif from a personal archive of decorative concrete blocks used to fashion *quebrasoles* and *rejas* seen throughout Puerto Rico. With a practice that sits at the intersection of architectural intervention and storytelling, this motif, unsurprisingly, holds greater meaning than the simplicity of its appearance might suggest.

The circle with four leaves surrounding it is derived from Adinkra symbols from the



Akan of Ghana. Adinkra symbols are part of a visual language in which each pictorial design bears meaning. Stylistically, Adinkra symbols are based on flora and fauna, the human body, or the elements and can be seen printed onto fabrics, etched into pottery, on buildings, and on furniture.¹

The symbol in this piece is not found in traditional dictionaries of Adinkra symbols. However, elements of it like the circle at the center are present in a few different symbols. It is not uncommon for Adinkra to hybridize parts of other symbols to create something with a new meaning. The *sesa wo suban* is a perfect example of this—combining the symbols of the morning star and the wheel to represent change or the transformation of one’s character.² This particular Adinkra-derived motif in *GRAFT* could be another amalgam of different symbols and their constituent meanings.

Soto’s interventions are often gentle provocations that invite viewers to think more deeply about the complex histories of colonization and African diasporic influence in Puerto Rico’s architecture.



Symbols like this are far from the only Akan influence to permeate Puerto Rican culture. For instance, the etymology of the country's traditional bomba music and dance can be traced to the Akan and Bantu.³ By emphasizing and maintaining the forms of Adinkra symbols in this series, Soto cites and makes visible the role of African diasporic traditions in her country's architecture.

These gestures of calling upon familiar structures and foregrounding an Adinkra symbol speak to the poignant, layered storytelling practice that is omnipresent in Soto's practice. The more one looks at any iteration of *GRAFT*, the more clear the patterns become. Shapes become more distinct and the discourses in which they are mired manifest. *GRAFT* subtly inspires a breaking down of the divide between vernacular architectural intervention and complex, often contentious histories.



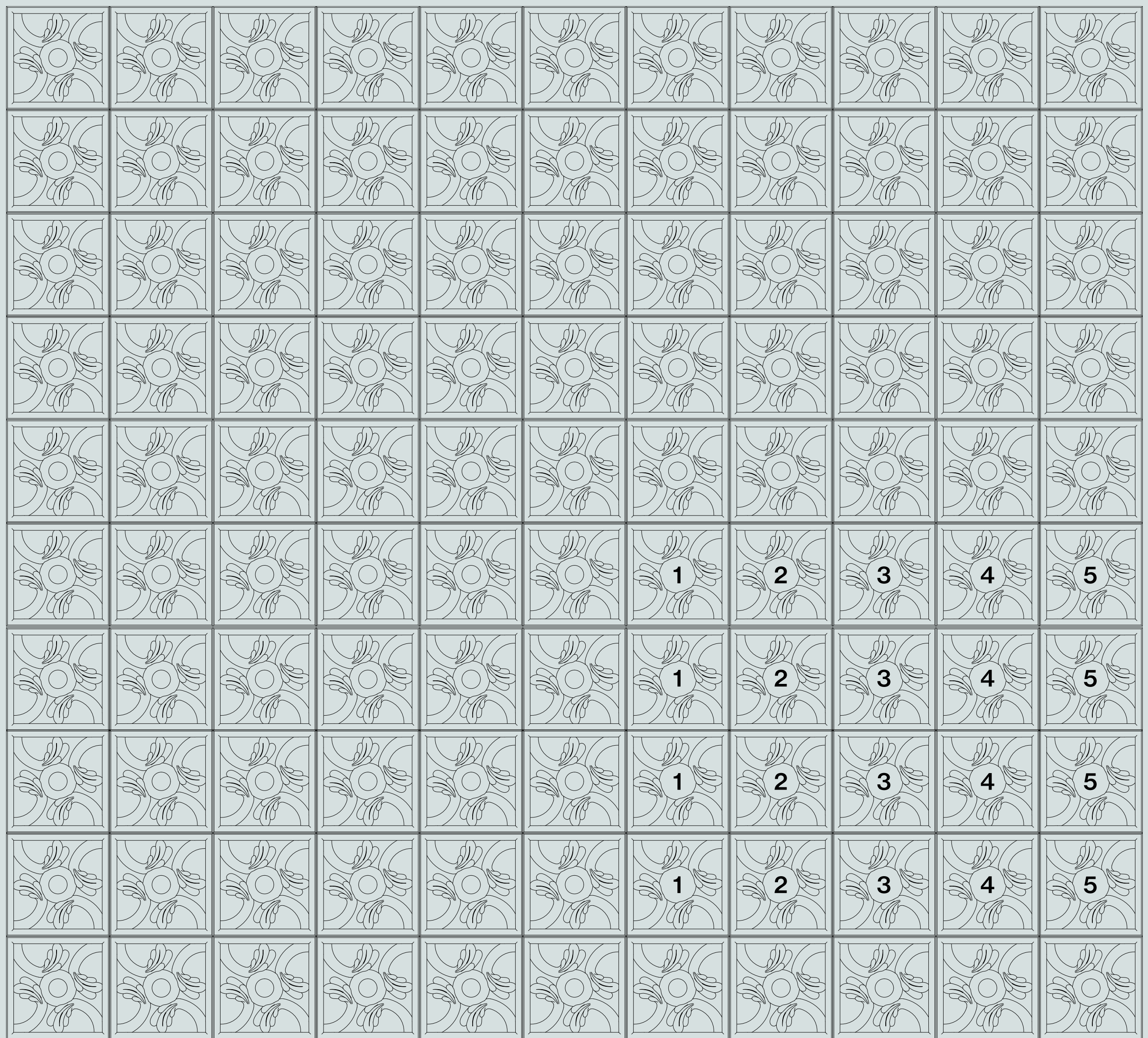
- 1 Charles Korankye, *Adinkra Alphabet: The Adinkra Symbols as Alphabets & Their Hidden Meanings*, (Alphabet LLC, 2021).
- 2 W. Bruce Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra*, (Pyramid Complex, 1998).
- 3 Jasmin Isabel Torrejón, “Enduring Resilience: An Exploration of Puerto Rican Colonization, Hurricane Maria, and Ongoing Healing through Cultural Rituals,” *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*, 2019. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/140

Adia Sykes is an arts organizer and curator based in Chicago. Her practice seeks to center philosophies of improvisation, intuition, and care, engaging them as tools through which meaningful relationships between artists and viewers can be cultivated while leaving space for the vernacular to mingle with constructs of history and theory.



Detail of breeze block wall at the San Gerardo gated community, Cupey, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2021. Photograph by Edra Soto.

● Contributing Artists

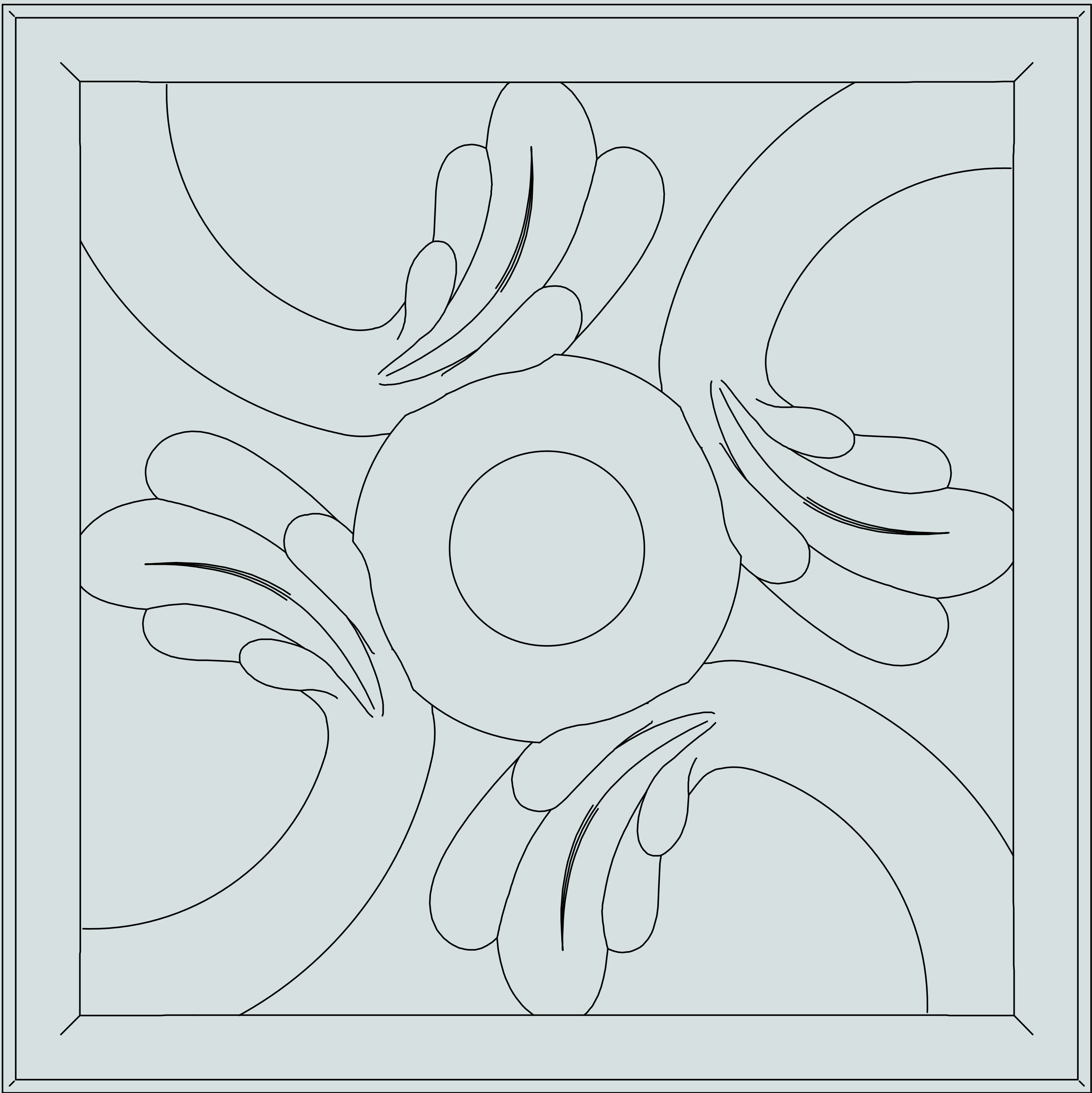


1 Daniela Paola Nutz “SUPAKID” is a first-generation Puerto Rican born to immigrant parents in the concrete jungle of Bayamón. SUPAKID is a multi-faceted project with its strengths in photography and illustration. After completing her BFA in La Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, Daniela delved even more into capturing the reality of an island in austerity. The political limbo, natural disasters, and the pandemic demand constant documenting of the daily life and architecture of these spaces. In 2020, Daniela created a series of books that document local architecture and everyday scenes, thanks to a grant from the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures (NALAC). The images that SUPAKID creates are rich in creamy colors and neon lights, mixed in with elements of design. SUPAKID’s work has been in exhibits in Puerto Rico, the U.S., at the MoCP in Chicago, MAPR, Museo del Arsenal, and was part of LIBER International Book Fair in Spain.

- 2 Gabi Pérez-Silver** was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where she lived until moving to New York to study photography when she was 18 years old. There, for the first time in her life, she experienced all four seasons and was inspired to create works about adapting and adjusting to new environments, focusing on the complexities of our minds as we face the unknown. Her photography reflects how she relates to the world and is often inspired by observation and direct contact with her subject and her surroundings. Gabi is currently based in Puerto Rico, where she works on her own as a photographer capturing the daily life of her days on the island, where she takes refuge while waiting for the hurricane to pass again, that is, the difficult times. You can see his work at gbiprz.com and on Instagram @gbiprz.
- 3 Norma Vila Rivero** (b. 1982; Puerto Rico) is an interdisciplinary artist, exhibition coordinator, and cultural manager. She received a BA in Visual Arts from the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón (2005) and an MA in Art Administration from the Ana G. Méndez, Universidad del Turabo (2010). Her work has been presented in Argentina, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mallorca, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Puerto Rico, Switzerland, Saint Croix, and several states in the U.S. In 2017, she was selected to participate in the Occupy Museums Debt Fair installation at the Whitney Biennial. In 2020, she received a National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures Artist Grant to continue her project “A Metaphor Against Oblivion.” Vila Rivero’s work is in the Luciano Benetton Collection; the collections of the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico, the Museo y Centro de Estudios Humanísticos Dra. Josefina Camacho de la Nuez, Puerto Rico; the International Foundation Fund for the Arts, Madrid, Spain; and numerous private collections.
- 4 Mari Blanca Robles López** is a Caribbean visual artist, photojournalist and documentarist, born and raised in Yauco, Puerto Rico. She started her career as a photographer capturing images of the music scene in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, where she found her passion for photo documentation. Since then her work has focused on the political intersection between art and the human condition. This has led to establishing roots focused on feminism, independence, daily life, culture, and dreams of better futures.



- 5** **Javier Orfon** was born in Caguas, Puerto Rico (1989). In 2013, he earned his BFA in Sculpture from the Fine Arts Department of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. He participated in La Práctica, a forum of research, organized by Beta-Local (2019–2020). In 2020, he had his third solo exhibition *El Ojo de Arcilla*, at Hidrante Art Space in Santurce, Puerto Rico. He had the first international solo exhibition, *La Casa de Las Almas* curated by Abdiel Segarra Ríos, at Espacio Cómplices, Madrid, Spain. He has participated in several group exhibitions in Puerto Rico, such as *El Momento del Yagrumo* curated by Marina Reyes Franco, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico (2021); and *Atlas de lo perdido* curated by Arnaldo Rodríguez Bagué; and *Caribbean Yet To Come* (2022). During the summer of 2022, he participated in the Skowhegan School of Painting And Sculpture. His work is a part of the group exhibition at *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria* curated by Marcela Guerrero, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The artist currently lives and works between San Lorenzo and Caguas, Puerto Rico.



Edra Soto
b. 1971; Santurce, Puerto Rico

GRAFT, 2022
PVC, latex enamel paint, aluminum frames,
viewfinders, and inkjet prints, dimensions variable

Collection of the artist; courtesy Engage Projects, Chicago

This publication was produced in conjunction with the presentation of Edra Soto, *GRAFT*, 2022. This work was included in the exhibition *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on view November 23, 2022–April 23, 2023.

This exhibition is organized by Marcela Guerrero, Jennifer Rubio Associate Curator; with Angelica Arbelaez, Rubio Butterfield Family Fellow; and Sofía Silva, former Curatorial and Education Fellow in US Latinx Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Design: Jonathan Gorman and Isai Soto

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