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Título: Ivelisse Jiménez: Transparency, Transience and Emergency

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Resumen: Ivelisse Jiménez, a widely acclaimed Puerto Rican artist who has been at the forefront of the art scenes in San Juan and New York, emerges from the devastation of Hurricane Maria with new works and exhibitions. Building on themes of transparency, resilience and transience, she continues to further expand her complex, syncopated approach to structure and composition. [Bilingual version].

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Ivelisse Jiménez, *Ten Con Ten #8*, 2002 (detail).

A fundamental concern for artists, extending back to the earliest practices of art, involves the rendering of elemental binaries: the telluric and the spiritual, the enduring and the ephemeral, the opaque and the transparent. Often these aspects could be suggested, as they might suggest many other things in the process: a series of undulating lines for a river or a sea, or the pigments more generally associated with earth, sky, fire or water.

What is currently acknowledged as among the first successful depictions of transparency can be found in ancient Egyptian tomb frescos. The practice is not limited in any way to works produced within the Western tradition, however, since the perceptual issues revolving around reproducing transparency via essentially opaque mediums (pigment on walls, canvas, wood, paper or fabric) were grappled with in Persian and Mughal art, and very convincingly in Chinese scroll painting, to name a few.



Tomb of Jeserkaresneb, 18th Dynasty, Egypt (c. 1550–1292 BC).

As Bilge Sayim and Patrick Cavanagh note, “Transparency was already depicted in paintings in Ancient Egypt around 1600 BC. The motivation then was probably to capture the precious sheer materials, silk and cotton, worn by the pharaohs and members of their court” (Sayim, Kavanagh).

The rendering of transparent materials or elements in painting arguably reached its apex during the Baroque period in Europe, when exploring optics and spatial and temporal dynamics—and even our very understanding of space and time—also played a key role. The glass of wine delicately held aloft in Caravaggio’s *Bacchus* (c. 1595), for example, not only presents a brilliantly executed image of transparent crystal, but also the very moment when the painting was created, as suggested by the ripples on the surface of the wine (echoing, perhaps, the nervous tremor of the sitter). It is surmised that the image is reversed, as well, and that it is therefore a double-reflection: the first of the subject in a mirror and the second on the canvas painted by Caravaggio.[1]



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. *Bacchus* (detail / c. 1595). Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Dutch seventeenth-century artists used transparency and optics to detonate the boundaries of what was in fact a very confined world. The reduced interior spaces and narrow plots of urban townhouses were expanded in the eye of viewers (and, most notably, the merchant-class patrons who commissioned these works) through the use of light streaming through windows, reflections on lustrous and transparent objects, and the geometric foreshortening of rooms, made visible through open doors and seemingly extending into infinity. As Michel Foucault observes in his essay on Velázquez's *Meninas*:

In Dutch painting it was traditional for mirrors to play a duplicating role: they repeated the original contents of the picture, only inside an unreal, modified, contracted, concave space. One saw in them the same things as one saw in the first instance in the painting, but decomposed and recomposed according to a different law.



Pieter Claesz. *Vanitas with Violin and Glass Bowl*. (c. 1628). Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.

The opulent table settings (arranged behind humble doors) in seventeenth-century Dutch art, particularly in still lifes and genre painting, bore their own cautions in the overriding theme of Vanitas: the allures of the material world were seen as transient, and aside from expanding the spatial boundaries of the frame, they also temporarily disguised an inevitable undoing of this sumptuous world of objects through death and disintegration. The material thus carried with it its own dematerialization.

The pursuits of Baroque painters in their attempts to confound the limitations of space—and, most importantly, the limitations of the canvas—by playing with the perceptions of the viewer, represent one possible vector for approaching the work of Ivelisse Jiménez, a contemporary Puerto Rican artist who would seem far removed from the representational practices of seventeenth-century Netherlandish art.^[2]

One of the most widely acclaimed abstract artists working in Puerto Rico today, Jiménez's central concerns lie in creating tensions between transparency and opacity and our own far broader understandings of materiality and immateriality. Instead of implying transparency via pigment applied to canvas, the artist employs transparent and translucent materials that are layered and arranged within syncopated compositions that allude to works created on canvas, or may even include painting and drawing, yet which occupy an often-confounding hybrid space (sometimes interior, sometimes exterior). Over time, these works have gained greater complexity in layering and in the inclusion of a range of seemingly textual elements that have expanded her artistic lexicon. They have also gained urgency.

Due to various factors, abstraction has, until relatively recently, not been a primary focus in Puerto Rico's artistic narrative. In many respects, the history of painting (and art in general) in Puerto Rico has showcased themes of identity (drawing from a "national imaginary") or politics,

and, has thus tended to foreground representational and figurative works. Some earlier abstract artists, such as Olga Albizu (1924–2005), even felt obliged to practice their professions outside of Puerto Rico. This situation has certainly changed over the past decades, and the receptivity toward abstract, (Neo-) Expressionist and conceptual idioms has grown considerably. Yet, if there is a problem with abstraction, it may be that it defies inscription along an ever-progressing horizon of cultural identity production.[3] For many, it exists as pure form, asemic writing, or possibly some jazz-inflected visual poetry (Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*). This may be an opinion shared by some of the artists themselves. In an interview some years ago, Olga Albizu confessed, "To a certain extent, I believe in art for art's sake. I believe in eternal art and eternal values, in Botticelli and Kandinsky, in the will to live. I really don't think an artist at this moment in time has to give a political or social interpretation to his work" (Albizu/Friedman).

The work of Ivelisse Jiménez does, however, invite a range of interpretations or modes of framing, especially in her most recent processes. Drawing from a vocabulary of disparate elements, she succeeds in creating a harmonic whole that nonetheless retains the tensions of a liminal realm, a border zone, one that is marked by strengths and fragilities. The results are sometimes akin to the alternately jarring and oneiric assemblages found in Cubist, Surrealist and Dadaist works—particularly Kurt Schwitters and Joseph Cornell, artists who worked with found objects to create often dreamlike yet unsettling images. Comparisons can also be made with the Abstract Expressionist constructions of Robert Rauschenberg. Yet, all of these shared practices, in their own distinct ways, echo the palimpsests of mass-produced imagery, or, as one critic has termed it, "the detritus of capitalist cultural production" (Heynen).

Perhaps the uncanniest element can be found in the "hinges" that Jiménez employs to fuse together the chromatic and painted layers of her work. In the abstract paintings of Mondrian, the unified whole appears geometrically seamless, however, on closer inspection, we can readily perceive the human imperfections of the painted/inscribed line. In Jiménez's work, the unified whole at times seems almost impossible, and the materials she employs to wind everything together can be unexpectedly spontaneous and improvised. The brilliant (arguably "Caribbean") palette of her works often derives from swaths of mylar, Plexiglas, and acetate, bound together with masking tape—readily available commodities of mass-production. These supports are also only discerned upon closer examination. It is then that we understand the tenuous resonances of her enterprise—the entire structure suggests inevitable collapse, thereby inserting additional tensions. As Jiménez recently noted, "I believe that an important element in my process is that I seek to redeem imperfect visual circumstances, to redeem the imperfections integrated within things; I dissimulate them and I integrate them." [4]

The artist has cited the impact which Brazilian Modernismo and Concretismo—particularly the work of Mira Schendel—and the Tropicália/Tropicalismo movement have had on her own practice.[5] In the latter case, the clear affinities can be seen in the use of brilliant color, often employing or drawing from synthetic and extemporaneously devised materials, which also mirror the resilient yet attenuated and often hardscrabble nature of contemporary life across the hemisphere. Although representing different historical periods and geographical

circumstances, Schwitters and Hélio Oiticica both spent part of their lives in political exile.[6] They also shared an organic approach to expanding abstraction beyond the boundaries of the canvas.

Ten Con Ten #8 (pictured at the beginning of this article), like many of her earlier works, infers an architectural syntax—frozen contrapuntal movement within an urban landscape (San Juan or New York?). The title of the work is lifted from an iconic yet largely untranslatable work by the Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos, who reinvigorated his literary career by incorporating Afro-Boricua themes and rhythms. The reference, which positions the work very much within a Puerto Rican context, might be lost on a foreign audience, just as Jiménez’s work resists immediate geographical or geopolitical placement. Palés Matos’s poem focuses on the subject of hybridity and liminality (neither this nor that), applied to Puerto Rico’s own colonial status and its admixture of irrepressible elements that are constantly in the process of definition, yet which remain ultimately undefined, and which are inevitably threatened by outside forces.



Ivelisse Jiménez, *Detour I*, 2010.

In an article for the Houston-based *Culture Map*, Jiménez briefly discussed her work, specifically the assemblage *Detour I*: “My main interest with this show is the impossibility of language. There are always gaps and detours when somebody tries to explain something, all these asides. That’s not just with verbal language, but with art as well” (Rudick). If the work can be approached from a dialogic angle, what is particularly striking are the fields that evoke figurative works, most obviously on the right margin and possibly the left. These may be the

palimpsests that the artist repeats from her own archive of images, as part of the “conversation,” and they immediately recall the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat or Philip Guston. Such figurative inserts (detours) operate as motifs in many of her later works, creating yet another layer of possible signifiers. Here, as elsewhere, however, transparency functions against itself as an obstruction—these figurative elements that might afford an immediately recognizable point for decoding are only partly revealed—the implication being that transparency, per se, is also a fiction. Taken within the linguistic and political realities of Puerto Rico, the transparency afforded by language, of communicating across the boundaries of a bicultural/bilingual society—the transparency of “commonwealth” or “estado libre asociado”—is similarly, a partial truth, if not an outright lie.

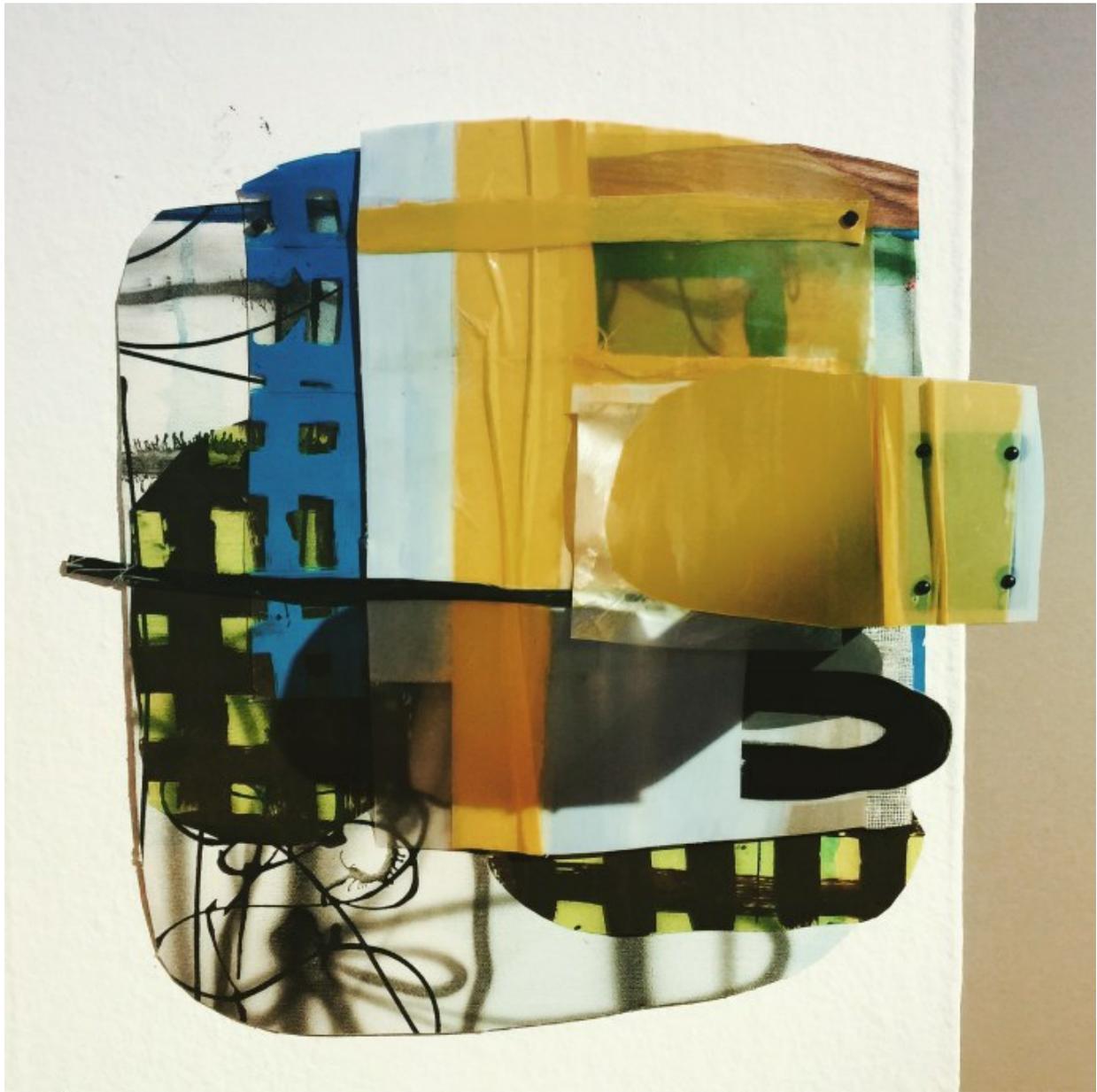
Jiménez’s most recent projects mark an intrepid departure, one which underscores the already extant Expressionist markings that sometimes surface in her work. The large-format installation titled *Fuera de Registro* (*Off-Register*, 2018) currently occupies a stairwell landing at the Casa de los Contrafuertes in Old San Juan. Compared to other installations and assemblages, it seems alternately liberated and unhinged, with layers that appear to drift off-kilter in the breeze. Due to its size and location within this exhibition space, the work cannot be examined as a whole, but only in segments.



Ivelisse Jiménez. *Fuera de Registro* (Off-Register, 2018). (Photo: Josean Bruno Gómez).

Initially planned and begun in the summer of 2017, many of the work's components suffered severe damage due to the impact of Hurricane Maria, when Jiménez's main working studio in the Villa Nevárez neighborhood of San Juan was flooded, destroying 28 of her most important works, along with notebooks and photography. The works lost were also to comprise a retrospective exhibition that had been planned by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, yet which due to funding issues never materialized. The experience was devastating for the artist, however faced with the challenges of newly organized exhibitions, she reformulated the work, partly using some of the materials that were damaged by the storm. To anyone who experienced the hurricane and its aftermath, the installation immediately recalls the torn awnings strewn across the country, or the makeshift tarps that dotted the landscape in the "recovery." Punctuated by drawings that again evoke Guston or Basquiat, *Fuera de Registro*, also features lines of poetry penned by Urayoán Noel, the self-described "stateless" poet. The poems, however, cannot be discerned, since they are obscured under translucent layers.

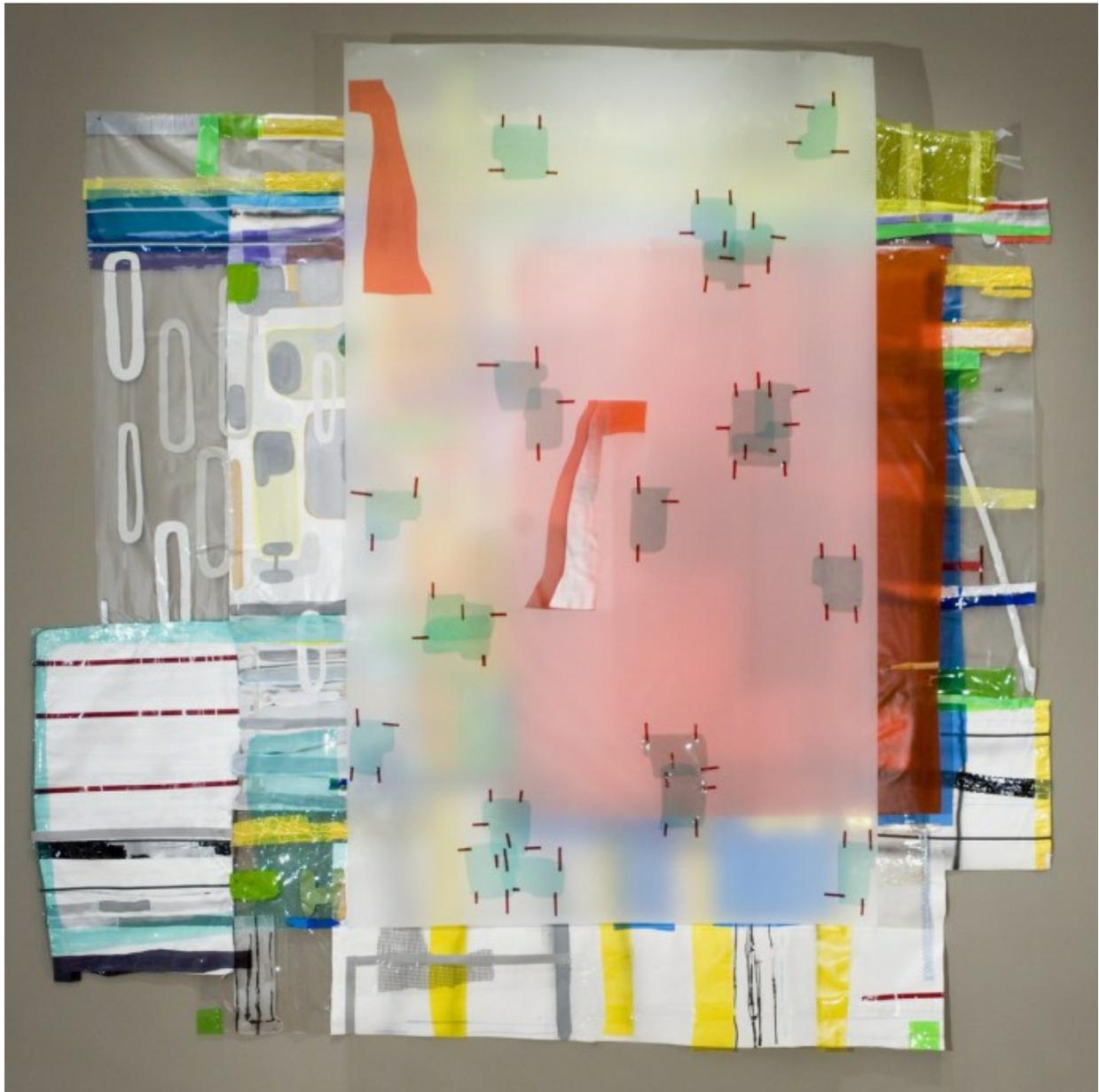
The artworks that populate the artist's current exhibition (*Intervalos, Confines & Territorios*) at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón in Santurce, Puerto Rico, break with the artist's more generalized rectangular canvas evocations[7], delving at times into highly expressive figuration.



Ivelisse Jiménez, *No. 16, Intervalos, Confines y Territorios*, 2018.

The work titled *No. 16* from this series presents a recognizable profile, swathed in readily discernable masking tape. The piece could stand in for an Expressionist *Lucha Libre* portrait, or an Aztec rendering of Tlaloc. It is graced by a highly disconcerting, toothy grin and a single eye that seems to contain another partially concealed portrait. Despite the ebullient and even ludic quality to this series, there are unsettling underpinnings, and at times the images nearly tremble with the repercussions of disaster and loss. The artist has downplayed this “backstory” to her latest work, claiming that her experience is one that was shared by all Puerto Ricans, many of whom suffered far greater calamities.[8]

Despite the implicit courage and resilience, the process of recovery from disaster is always marked by trauma, and for Jiménez, so much of what she has built over time now only resides in the fleeting yet persistent images of her memory.



Ivelisse Jiménez, *Ten Con Ten #8*, 2002.

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[1] This aspect has been suggested by various authors. See: Hockney D. *Secret Knowledge: Discovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. New York: Viking Studio (2001).

[2] Alejo Carpentier discusses the essential Baroque character of all Latin American art in *Tientos y Diferencias*. The assertion, while certainly tantalizing, might not be embraced by all Latin American artists at this stage.

[3] See Marimar Benítez's commentary on the frictions between the "Generación del 50" and subsequent avant-garde movements in *Puerto Rico: Arte e Identidad*.

[4] Email correspondence, April 14, 2018.

[5] Telephone conversation with Ivelisse Jiménez, April 11, 2018.

[6] Oiticica's exile was to some degree self-imposed. However, colleagues and associates both in music and art who remained in Brazil did suffer the consequences, which included imprisonment. Schwitters was forced into exile after his work was deemed "degenerate" by the Nazi regime. Mira Schendel also fled from fascist Italy after she was designated as being Jewish.

[7] The Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, which owns *Ten Con Ten #8*, categorizes the assemblage as a "painting."

[8] Telephone conversation with Ivelisse Jiménez, April 11, 2018.