

# VISIÓN | doble

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**Título:** El atlas de René Santos

**Title:** René Santos' Atlas

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**Resumen:** El Programa Graduado de Traducción de la Universidad de Puerto Rico – Recinto de Río Piedras, colabora nuevamente con *Visión Doble*, en este caso, recordando la exhibición René Santos: el grado cero de la imagen, celebrada en el Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico en 2013.

**Abstract:** The Graduate Program in Translation of the University of Puerto Rico – Río Piedras Campus, contributes again to *Visión Doble*, this time with the translation of a text on the exhibition René Santos: The Degree Zero of the Image, held at the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico in 2013. Originally published in Spanish in March 2013.

**Palabras clave:** René Santos, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, Pintura, Encaústica, Medios de masas, Lisa Blanco

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## **Visión Doble: Revista de Crítica e Historia del Arte**

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## *The Atlas of René Santos*

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René Santos, Sin Título, 1979. Photo: Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.

The sound of a carousel slide projector is heard as images of daily life, portraits, newspaper photos, stills from films and TV programs, animals, botanical illustrations, and architectural ornamentation are projected through an opening in the exhibition's entrance wall. In the gallery space around these slide projections, we find a collection of artworks that comprise the first retrospective exhibition of René Santos at the Puerto Rico Museum of Art. At first glance, the combination of images may remind us of the works of Aby Warburg, an art historian from Hamburg, whose last project was known as the *Atlas Mnemosyne* (1924). Dissatisfied with the idea of an exhibition with a coherent narrative flow, he developed an atlas of images to retell the memories of European civilization using moving panels onto which he affixed photos and images from various periods and categories. Hence, he transformed the way in which images might be viewed for the rest of history. His intention was to understand the politics of the image by juxtaposing them transversally.



René Santos' technique of degree-zero reproductivity is not widely known. Despite his premature death (1954-1986), he managed to successfully insert himself into the New York avant-garde art scene of the 1980s, becoming one of the first Puerto Ricans to exhibit his work at the Venice Biennale. In Puerto Rico, his work can only be seen in a few museums and private collections, since most of this art remains in the possession of his family. Given these circumstances, Juan Carlos López Quintero, curator of the exhibition *René Santos: Image Degree Zero*, based his research on the analysis and reconstruction of a possible atlas that was part of the pictorial and intellectual world of this Puerto Rican artist who lived in New York. His objective was to understand the artist's intellectual background as well as his working method, thus the curator uses the slideshow—as an introduction to the exhibition and the result of accessing the artists personal archives, which are now kept by his parents—to serve as a point of departure for understanding the origin for many of the images that were appropriated by the artist. For Santos, the image served as the artist's greatest lifelong preoccupation. Through his work, he sought to uncover the meaning and value of images in an age that was growing ever more imagesaturated. The first pieces of this exhibition reflect the influence of advertising, television, magazines, newspapers, and cinema. His works from the late 1970s to the early 1980s generally present hyperrealistically rendered figures against a somewhat Expressionist background. These works are based on characters from films, fotonovelas, or magazines, which are removed from their original context. The modification in the order of the image imbues it with new meaning. For Santos, there is an implied search for understanding the figure, and where it emerges from.



René Santos, *Untitled*, 1981. Source: catalog of the exhibition *René Santos: El grado cero de la imagen*, 2012.

Despite the artist's sexual orientation, many of his works deal ostensibly with relationships between men and women. The first part of the exhibition is dominated by depictions of men and women together, yet the women are also often alone, and seen as either trapped or vaunting their sex appeal to men who react with indifference or rejection.

Following this line of work during the same years, Santos produced some images inspired by *fotonovelas* in which he juxtaposes photos and texts. In these works, the main characters are Rene [sic] and, occasionally his feminine alter ego, Renee [sic], portraying scenes dealing with love, art, intolerance, madness, jealousy, external appearance, as well as other issues.



And all the time she kept screaming—screaming abuse and threats at the one person she hated above all others: Renee.

Renee was to blame for everything that had ever happened to her. Renee had stolen her own mother's love from her; stolen her dolls, makeup and her best friend in school. Then she had stolen her style, turned it against her, making everything seem like a plot against her. Teachers and doctors wanted to shut her up in an insane asylum. And there, she knew she'd sit for the rest of her days doing art as if it were a form of therapy...

René Santos, *Untitled* ["And all the time she kept screaming abuse and threats at the person"], n.d. Photo: Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.

Later the artist embarked on a search for a more conceptual image. He left aside extracting popular images from their contexts and started focusing on details. It is at this juncture that he began working on his series of cats and dogs—subjects that are omnipresent throughout the history of art; a series of close-ups taken from TV images known as *Applying Lipstick* and *TV Surgery*, both from 1984; as well

as the Harp Drawings with their characteristic fine red lines. This last series of impeccably rendered drawings depict everyday scenes that resemble newspaper photos floating against a dark background. One of his last works were the portraits (full and empty) painted from photos by Félix Nadar, one of the pioneers in the field of portraits of renowned figures of the time.



René Santos, Exhibition: *El grado cero de la imagen*. Foto: John Betancourt, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.

In one of the pieces from his image/text series, the artist presents the photo of a woman inside an art studio. She is apparently suffering a fit of rage since the image captures the moment when she appears to be hurling the paintings surrounding her onto the floor. The text narrates the story of a girl who has gone mad with rage as a result of the fictional Renee, who has evidently robbed her of virtually everything in her life. The text adds that because of this, teachers and doctors have decided to put her in an insane asylum, concluding in the following way, “And there, she knew she’d sit for the rest of her days doing art as if it were a form of therapy...” “Perhaps this is a reference to René himself as a misunderstood exile who sought solace in his own world of art?”



In conclusion, the exhibition offers a starting point for understanding the pictorial and intellectual atlas of René Santos by presenting a collection characterized by the artists own search for visual significance and worth by studying images retroactively from contemporary back to ancient times. Always moved by photography, an everpresent resource in his work, the artist returns to degree zero, before that time when the world became saturated with images, to the very beginnings of what experience today: the image prior to the age of mechanical reproduction.



René Santos, Exhibition: *El grado cero de la imagen*. Foto: John Betancourt, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.

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