



Con los santos no se juega

Don't Mess with the Saints

University Galleries

WILLIAM PATERSON UNIVERSITY



► Con los santos no se juega

Don't Mess with the Saints

 Juan Betancurth

 Rodriguez Calero

 José Camacho

 Ana Mendieta

 Clara Morera

 Pepón Osorio

 Ernesto Pujol



ESSAY

KRISTEN EVANGELISTA

Director, University Galleries

Con los santos no se juega, con los santos no se juega date un baño tienes que hacerte una limpieza con rompe saragüey.

Excerpt from “Rompe Saragüey”
by Héctor Lavoe



ERNESTO PUJOL
Grass Circle
2009 • Detail

RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS, RITUALS, AND SYMBOLS ARE KEY POINTS OF INSPIRATION FOR THE ARTISTS FEATURED IN THIS EXHIBITION. The artists recast revered spiritual traditions from faiths such as Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, and Santería as an expression of their own personal belief systems. The exhibition title makes light of their bold actions; it is drawn from the song “Rompe Saragüey” by Puerto Rican singer Héctor Lavoe. In his lyrics, Lavoe describes the eponymous plant that is commonly associated with Santería, a syncretic religion of Yoruba traditional beliefs and Catholicism. Latin American and Latino music has long involved spiritual singing and chanting; this was especially significant during the period of slavery. A parallel interest developed later in the visual arts; at the turn of the twentieth century, artists became fascinated with African religious objects and embraced inner spirituality and mysticism in place of organized religion. Cuban artist Wifredo Lam was pivotal in cultivating the aesthetic aspect of Santería and subsequent generations follow in his

footsteps. By looking to the spiritual realm, the artists in this exhibition gain a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit, and the meaning of our existence.

Through performance, sculpture, and installation, Juan Betancurth draws upon his own personal experiences to address themes of domesticity, witchcraft, and spirituality. In *Harness*, he presents a diminutive mannequin who carries a wooden ladder on his back. Since ancient times, the ladder has symbolized a path to spiritual enlightenment, in particular Jacob’s Ladder, which appeared in a dream to the biblical figure in the Book of Genesis. Here, the ladder is a cumbersome burden for the figure that signifies the sacrifice we endure in the pursuit of spiritual transcendence. The figure stands before a plumb line, a metal weight suspended from a cord that is commonly employed by carpenters and masons to achieve a vertical line. For the artist, the device: “represents [his] obsession to be centered and [his] constant wish to be focused, also a line to get magnetic energy from earth.”

Rodriguez Calero creates meticulously layered portraits — reinterpretations of the traditional iconography of Catholic saints. The artist has developed a unique method of combining painting and collage, which she calls “acrollage” painting. Her source material often includes textiles, her own photographs, and appropriated images from fashion magazines. By incorporating familiar visual forms, she expresses an urban sensibility and envisions contemporary “saints” from multicultural backgrounds. For example, in *Fallen Angel*, she recasts a bald tattooed man as a wounded spirit with damaged wings. Moreover, she prompts us to reflect on the role of the spiritual in contemporary society.

“Together, the artists in this exhibition advance new approaches to long-standing belief systems and teachings, and their engagement with religion engenders poignant artistic creativity and innovation.”

José Camacho investigates the relationship between text and image with a particular interest in Puerto Rican music, literature, and popular culture. He often embraces a playful tone and infuses his artwork with witty puns. In *Dios te Salve (May God Help You)*, he fastidiously stenciled the Hail Mary prayer on a large sheet of

paper. Then, he mounted the paper on canvas and applied a dark graphic finish to the surface. Camacho explains, “the process itself is very ritualistic and tedious, somewhat akin to the spiritual ordeal of art making.” In addition, the text is challenging to read as the words appear without spaces, perhaps in acknowledgement of the way the prayer is often recited with little pause by seasoned Catholic parishioners. Through his choice of title, Camacho encourages the viewer to reconsider the prayer’s meaning and imparts an ambiguous perspective on spiritual salvation.

Starting in the 1970s, Ana Mendieta created silhouettes of her body in dirt, sand, mud, or even snow. Her practices included digging shallow channels in the ground and molding low reliefs from flowers, twigs, leaves, fire, or blood. Theses spontaneous and ephemeral actions, documented in photography and Super-8 film, evoked the characteristics of ritualized performances. Mendieta found inspiration in Afro-Cuban ceremonies that she witnessed as a child and endeavored to incorporate her Cuban heritage in her artistic practice. She merged her body with the earth as re-interpretation of Santería’s earth-centered rituals. Furthermore, her use of natural materials can be considered a tribute to Santería’s orishas or deities of earth, fire, and water.

Clara Morera is well known for her mixed media tapestries featuring a personal visual vocabulary based on Afro-Cuban traditions. In her new paintings *Copas* or *Cups*, she emulated the shape of the goblets that are displayed on altars in Afro-Cuban sacred rites. For this exhibition, she portrayed the orishas: Yemaya, The Goddess of the Sea and Shango (Santa Barbara). Morera re-envisions Shango, the god of fire, lightning, and thunder as a white robed female figure bearing the sword of Santa Barbara.

CLARA MORERA
Yemaya,
The Goddess of the Sea,
2012 • Detail



Shango is commonly identified with the early Christian saint of lightning, demonstrating the syncretic nature of Santería. In 2010, she created *Saint Paris* as her tribute to El Santo Pajaro, the Saint Bird of Old Havana. Morera also found inspiration in the powerful bird spirit, “Mayimbe,” who is believed to be a messenger between Earth and Heaven.

Pepón Osorio creates large-scale environments, often encompassing entire rooms, in a baroque aesthetic of decorative “chucherias” or knick-knacks. Drawing upon his initial training as a social worker, he frequently collaborates with communities and addresses social issues based on real life situations. In the works in this exhibition, he used found and altered objects to explore issues of transformation. For example, in *Ascending/Descending*, Osorio displayed a pair of ordinary sandals that are pierced with numerous stickpins and comment on spiritual transcendence. The sandals feature photographs of feet, perhaps suggesting that our physical body is channel to enlightenment. In *Purifier*, Osorio placed a glass of water on a high shelf near the top of the wall. The accompanying text states: “A wise woman once gave me a spiritual remedy. She said, when life is unsettled, place a glass of water at the highest point of your house to clear the air. I have been doing so ever since. It works!).” As in many of his works, Osorio turns a personal experience into a collective or universal concept.

Performance artist and choreographer Ernesto Pujol has spent two decades exploring individual and collective memory, spirituality, and the body. A former cloistered monk and now a practicing Zen Buddhist, acts of meditation and contemplation are integral to his artistic practice. In the performance *Grass Circle*, Pujol and 23 graduate art students participated in daily morning

walks. Each artist performed alone, walking backwards in a circle for 30 minutes. Pujol collected the leaves of grass that accumulated on their feet and stored them in a vintage glass bottle as a kind of relic of the collaborative performance. Related to his monastic training, the artist employs religious garments as symbols for the transformation of the inner self. According to Pujol, they are “the outward sign of the interior reality of the seeker, the believer, if not the skin of his life-long pilgrimage.” In the project, *Conversion of Manners* from the larger series “Body of Faith,” Pujol wore robes from different monastic orders and emulated various ritual gestures and spiritual poses. The performance is documented in large-scale color photographs that investigate the relationship between body and spirit. By cloaking the body, the believer seeks to become anonymous and even genderless, conjuring a sacred incorporeal experience.

Together, the artists in this exhibition advance new approaches to long-standing belief systems and teachings, and their engagement with religion engenders poignant artistic creativity and innovation. The metaphysical realm serves as the basis for a profound personal investigation of the body, soul, and transcendence. Ultimately, the artists reveal the complex and multifaceted results that arise when you “mess with the saints.”

ILLUSTRATIONS

ERNESTO PUJOL
Grass Circle
2009 • Detail



Juan Betancurth



Harness, 2011
Site-specific installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Rodriguez Calero



Fallen Angel, 2012
Acrollage painting
48 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Santero, 2004
Acrollage painting
42 x 32 inches
Courtesy of the artist

José Camacho



Dios te Salve (May God Help You), 2009
Graphite on paper mounted on canvas
60 x 48 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Hold Me in Paradise, 2011
Mixed media and collage over
print mounted on paper
49 x 35 3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Ana Mendieta



Untitled, 1981
Black and white photograph
25 1/4 x 18 3/4 inches
Collection of The Newark Museum,
Purchase 2006
Friends of American Art



Untitled, 1981
Black and white photograph
25 1/4 x 18 3/4 inches
Collection of The Newark Museum,
Purchase 2006
Friends of American Art

Clara Morera



LEFT
Yemaya, The Goddess of the Sea, 2012
Mixed media on wood
51 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist

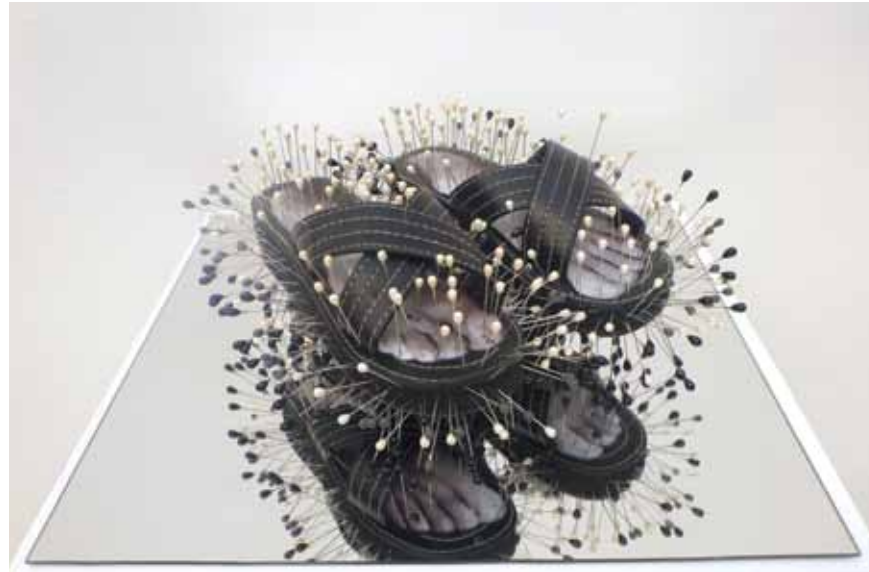


RIGHT
Shango, Santa Barbara, 2012
Mixed media on wood
51 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Saint Paris, 2010
Mixed media on canvas
55 x 58 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Pepón Osorio



Ascending/Descending, 2008
Mixed media (plastic sandals, pearl-tip
stick pins, collage and mirror)
19 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Purifier, 2011
Glass, water, shelf, and vinyl text
6 x 12 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Ernesto Pujol





Grass Circle, 2009
Slideshow
Duration: 12:42 minutes
Courtesy of the artist


Kneeling Carthusian from “Body of Faith: Conversion of Manners” and “Hagiography,” 2000–2001
C-print
32 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist





ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES


 **JUAN BETANCURTH** was born in 1972 in Manizales, Colombia, and he currently lives in Brooklyn, NY. He received his bachelor's degree from the Universidad Católica de Manizales in Columbia. He has participated in solo and group exhibitions at the Abrons Arts Center, New York (2011); Performa 11, New York (2011); Local Project, Long Island City, NY (2009, 2008); the Queens Museum of Art, NY (2008); and Garage Gallery, Bogotá, Columbia (2004). He recently participated in El Museo del Barrio's Bienal, New York (2011).


 **RODRIGUEZ CALERO** was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico and raised in New York. She currently lives and works in the Lower East Side in New York. She received her B.F.A. from the Institute of Culture, School of Fine Arts, Puerto Rico. Calero continued her studies of painting and collage at the Art Students League of New York. She has shown her work at the Paul Robeson Gallery, Rutgers University the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick (2009–10); the Jersey City Museum, NJ (2009–10); Bronx River Arts Center, NY (2006); and Centro Gallery, Hunter College, City University of New York (2005). She has received awards and fellowships from the Joan Mitchell Foundation (2008–9), the New Jersey State Council on the Arts (2002, 2000), the New York Foundation for the Arts (2000), and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation (1999).

 **JOSÉ CAMACHO** was born in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico in 1968. He currently lives and works in Montclair, NJ. Camacho studied at the Sagrado Corazón University in Puerto Rico as well as the Art Students League in New York before receiving his B.F.A. from Montclair State University in New Jersey. He has shown his work at the Walsh Gallery, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ (2011); City Without Walls, Newark, NJ (2008); the Mason Gross School of Arts, Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick (2007); the Newark Museum, NJ (1992); and the Paterson Museum, NJ (1991). He was awarded a fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts (2008) and a Print and Paper Fellowship from the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions at Rutgers University (2006).

 **ANA MENDIETA** was born in Havana, Cuba in 1948 and died in New York in 1985. Exiled from her native country in 1961, she lived and worked in Iowa and New York and traveled to Cuba, Mexico and Italy. She earned her B.A., M.A. and M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. Her work has been featured in national and international exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, IL (2011); the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2004); Kunstwerke, Berlin, Germany (2002); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (1998); the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1988); Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba (1983); A.I.R. Gallery, New York (1981); and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, São Paulo, Brazil (1980). She received numerous awards, most notably the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome (1983) and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (1980). Her work is represented in major public collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; among others.

 **CLARA MORERA** was born in 1944 in Camaguey, Cuba and currently lives in Jersey City, NJ. She studied at the National School of Visual Arts in Havana, Cuba and graduated from the San Alejandro Academy. She has participated in exhibitions at the Newark Museum, NJ (2011); Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, CT (2009); Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA (2008); the Rye Art Center, NY (2000); the Discovery Museum, Bridgeport, CT (1998); the Museum of the Americas, Washington, D.C. (1992); the Cuban Cultural House, Prague, Czech Republic (1980); and the National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba (1970); among others. Her work is included in several public and private collections.

 **PEPÓN OSORIO** was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico in 1955 and he now lives and works in Philadelphia, PA. After studying at the Universidad Inter-Americana in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, Osorio received his bachelor's degree from the Herbert H. Lehman College, Bronx, NY and his master's degree from Columbia University, New York. He has exhibited his work at El Museo del Barrio, New York (2009); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA (2004); Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, San Juan (2000); and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1993); among others. His work is represented in many public collections such as El Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan; the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT; and The National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C. He is the recipient of numerous awards including the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1999). Osorio is currently the Laura Carnell Professor of Community Art at Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA.

 **ERNESTO PUJOL** was born in Havana, Cuba in 1957 and now lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. He received his B.A. from the Universidad de Puerto Rico, and his M.F.A. in interdisciplinary art studio practice from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Pujol has participated in solo and group exhibitions at the Honolulu Academy of Art, HI (2011); Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS (2011); P.S. 1 Contemporary Arts Center, Long Island City, NY (2008); Chicago Cultural Center, IL (2007); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2007); the McNay Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX (2006); Jersey City Museum, NJ (2002); El Museo del Barrio, New York (2000); and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY (1997). He has received awards and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts (2008); the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (1998 and 1993); and the Joan Mitchell Foundation (1997). His work is represented in the collections of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; Casa de las Americas, Havana, Cuba; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; among many others.

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

JUAN BETANCURTH <i>Harness</i> , 2011 Site-specific installation Dimensions variable Courtesy of the artist	JOSÉ CAMACHO <i>El Padre Nuestro (Our Father)</i> , 2011 Graphite on paper 39 x 29 inches Collection of Marshall and Marlene Hendrian	ANA MENDIETA <i>Untitled</i> , 1981 Set of six (6) black and white photographs 25 1/4 x 18 3/4 inches each Collection of The Newark Museum, Purchase 2006 Friends of American Art	CLARA MORERA <i>Saint Paris</i> , 2010 Mixed media on canvas 55 x 58 inches Courtesy of the artist	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Carthusian Blessing (Madra)</i> from “Body of Faith: Conversion of Manners” and “Hagiography,” 2000–2001 C-print 19 x 15 inches Courtesy of the artist	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Grass Circle</i> , 2009 Slideshow Duration: 12:42 minutes Courtesy of the artist
RODRIGUEZ CALERO <i>Fallen Angel</i> , 2012 Acrollage painting 48 x 36 inches Courtesy of the artist	JOSÉ CAMACHO <i>Un Santo pero no Babalao</i> , 2010 Carbon transfer on found canvas with cross bar 49 3/4 x 48 inches Courtesy of the artist	ANA MENDIETA <i>Anima, Silueta de Cohetes (Firework Piece)</i> , 1976 Super-8 color, silent film transferred to DVD Duration: 2:22 minutes Edition of 6, GP1197 © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York	PEPÓN OSORIO <i>Ascending/Descending</i> , 2008 Mixed media (plastic sandals, pearl-tip stick pins, collage and mirror) 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 9 inches Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Triptych of Franciscans</i> from “Body of Faith: Conversion of Manners” and “Hagiography,” 2000–2001 C-print 44 x 31 inches each Courtesy of the artist	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Ledger from Grass Circle</i> , 2009 15 3/4 x 14 1/4 x 6 3/4 inches Vintage book Courtesy of the artist
RODRIGUEZ CALERO <i>The Seeker</i> , 2009 Acrollage painting 68 x 44 inches Courtesy of the artist	JOSÉ CAMACHO <i>Untitled (Pan Nuestro)</i> , 2006 Graphite, acrylic, shellac, and collage on matboard 31 1/2 x 41 inches Courtesy of the artist	CLARA MORERA <i>Yemaya, The Goddess of the Sea</i> , 2012 Mixed media on wood 51 x 16 inches Courtesy of the artist	PEPÓN OSORIO <i>Purifier</i> , 2011 Glass, water, shelf, and vinyl text 6 x 12 x 12 inches Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Hands and Feet (Franciscan)</i> from “Body of Faith: Conversion of Manners” and “Hagiography,” 2000–2001 C-print 25 x 26 inches Courtesy of the artist	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Glass bottle from Grass Circle</i> , 2009 Glass bottle, grass 5 1/8 x 1 3/4 x 1 3/4 inches Courtesy of the artist
RODRIGUEZ CALERO <i>Santero</i> , 2004 Acrollage painting 42 x 32 inches Courtesy of the artist	JOSÉ CAMACHO <i>Hold Me in Paradise</i> , 2011 Mixed media and collage over print mounted on paper 49 x 35 3/4 inches Courtesy of the artist	CLARA MORERA <i>Shango, Santa Barbara</i> , 2012 Mixed media on wood 51 x 16 inches Courtesy of the artist	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Kneeling Carthusian</i> from “Body of Faith: Conversion of Manners” and “Hagiography,” 2000–2001 C-print 32 x 22 inches Courtesy of the artist	ERNESTO PUJOL <i>Hands and Feet (Relic)</i> from “Body of Faith: Conversion of Manners” and “Hagiography,” 2000–2001 Bronze Courtesy of the artist	
JOSÉ CAMACHO <i>Dios te Salve (May God Help You)</i> , 2009 Graphite on paper mounted on canvas 60 x 48 inches Courtesy of the artist					



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