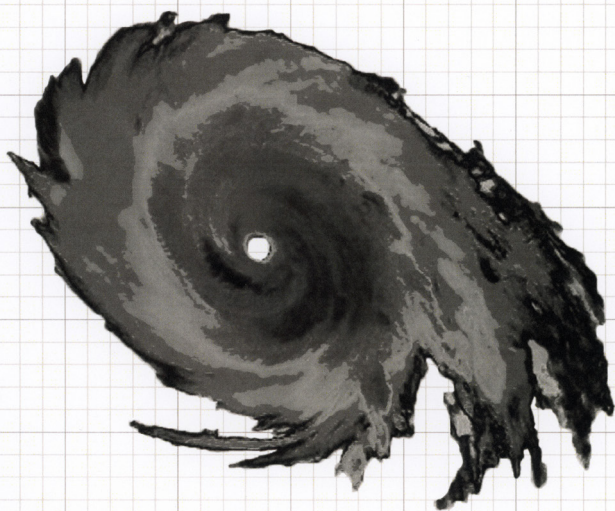


Kevin Quiles Bonilla

As the palm is bent, the boy is inclined



every puerto rican is a hurricane.

April 29 - July 31, 2021

Exhibition Statement:

Using interdisciplinary and performance-based strategies, my current work explores contemporary representations of colonialism, and the constant transits through unsolid grounds. I do so through the intersection of structures such as space, language, history and politics, with a body like mine transiting between Puerto Rico (the colony) and the United States (the mainland). I explore the idea of the hurricane as both a site of trauma and power. Ultimately, my work seeks to unearth the construction of an identity and a historic heritage, using my body as the container colonized by multiple structures of power. Through photography, video, performance, and installation, I question the synthesis of outcomes that arise from my lived experience as a Puerto Rican, as a diasporic migrant, as a queer individual, and as a person with a disability.

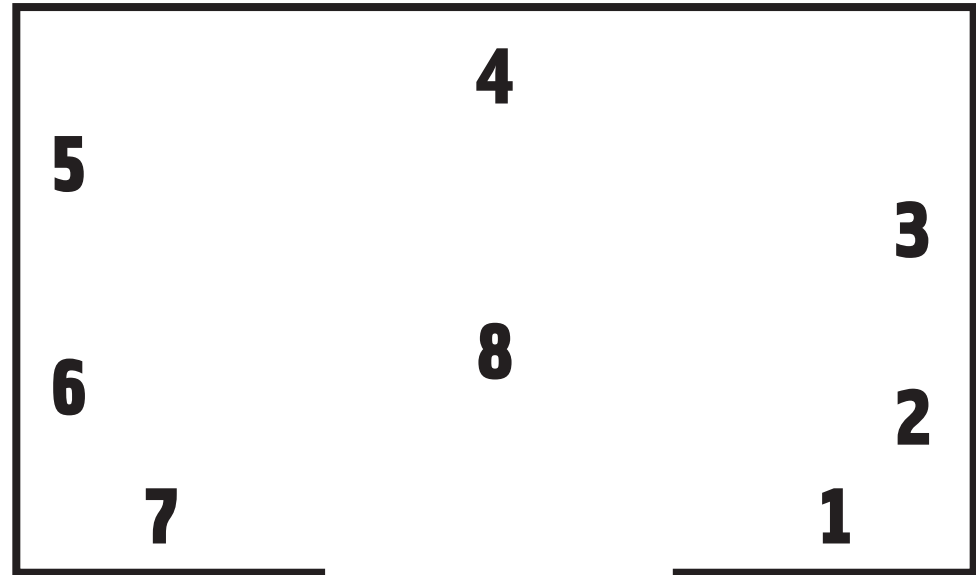
About the Artist

Kevin Quiles Bonilla (b. 1992) is an interdisciplinary artist born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He received a BA in Fine Arts – Photography from the University of Puerto Rico (2015) and an MFA in Fine Arts from Parsons The New School for Design (2018). He has recently presented his work at The Brooklyn Museum, Queens Museum, Smack Mellon, Dedalus Foundation, and the Leslie-Lohman Museum's Project Space. He currently lives and works between Puerto Rico and New York.

About the Real Art Awards:

The Real Art Awards are a juried competition open at no cost to emerging artists from the six New England states, New York and New Jersey. The 2020 Real Art Awards was juried by artist and educator Mary Mattingly, Director of the Laundromat Project Kemi Ilesanmi, and Real Art Ways Executive Director Will K. Wilkins. In addition to the cash prize and a solo exhibition, each artist receives logistical and curatorial support throughout the exhibition process. This project is supported in part by awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Edward C. and Ann T. Roberts Foundation.

Gallery Map



1: *Untitled (a proverb) [after Strohmeyer & Wyman, c. 1899]*, 2021
Inkjet print on transparency, 6 x 11 in.

2: *Carryover (Blue tarp in Vega Baja/ Coney Island)*, 2021
Digital photography in two (2) parts, 20 x 61 in

3: *Untitled (Exposure therapy documentation)*, 2002/2021
Analog photography, 8 x 10 in

4: *To absorb and contain*, 2021
Silkscreen print on eleven (11) paper towel rolls, eleven (11) paper towel holders, dimensions vary with installation

5: *Untitled (Sábado Gigante)*, 2021
Video (color, sound), 12:25 minutes

6: *...is a hurricane*, 2021
Three (3) inkjet prints on paper, 24 x 110 in

7: *Self-portrait of a young jíbaro (collaboration with Doris Bonilla Ramos)*, 1996/2021
Analog photography, 11 x 14 in

8: *While you dried in the sand*, 2021
Three (3) custom printed beach towels, two (2) custom printed wooden beach chairs, portable radio, sand, dimensions vary with installation



Untitled (a proverb) [after Strohmeyer & Wyman, c. 1899], 2021

This transparency of an 1800 stereograph taken in Puerto Rico inspired the title of the show. Found while researching 19th century photography of Puerto Rico in the Library of Congress, it is one of thousands of images taken by either US or European photographers who came to the island to capture Puerto Ricans in everyday activities. Ultimately these photographs created a very specific frame of who the Puerto Rican is and his relationship to otherness. It was another form of colonization.

The stereograph captures several children climbing some bent palm trees near Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. The photographer added the caption: "As the tree is bent, the boy is inclined," which is referencing the 16th century proverb "As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined," meaning that early influences have a permanent effect.

Carryover (Blue tarp in Vega Baja/Coney Island), 2021

I engage with a blue tarp, which became an iconographic symbol in a Puerto Rico post-hurricane María. These tarps were given by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, to people who had damage on the roofs of their house. Lots of houses on the island still have these tarps, even after more than a year of the hurricane. In this instance, I explore the literal and conceptual threshold of environments, landscapes, and climates the diasporic individual experiences.



Untitled (Exposure therapy documentation), 2002/2021

These photographs are part of a documentation for my former psychologist, during my first treatment for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder back in 2002. These photographs were meant to serve as 'proof' that the exposure therapy made an improvement on my daily routine. I'm touching a light switch in my bedroom and the toilet's flush lever, which I would've avoided touching as they were triggers for an incessant hand washing process.

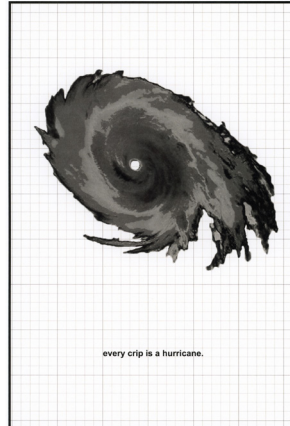
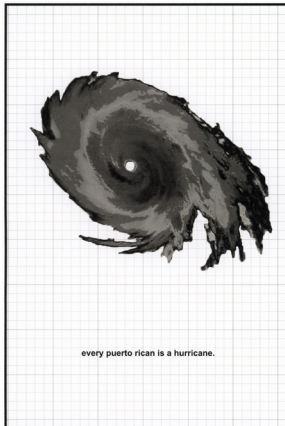
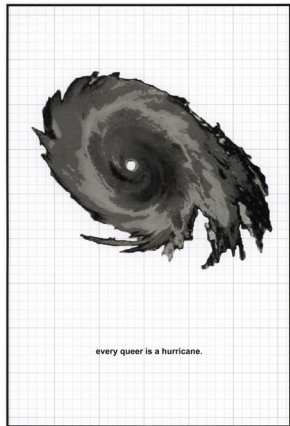


To absorb and contain, 2021

I reclaim the paper towel as a container of memory, after becoming a violent weapon thrown at Puerto Ricans by the former US President in the middle of a humanitarian crisis in 2017. Each roll contains a statement printed on every single sheet, from the former US President, the former Puerto Rican governor, and the Puerto Rican protesters. These figures became catalysts during the island's recent history.

Untitled (Sábado Gigante),
2021

Untitled (Sábado Gigante) explores the memory of my acknowledgment of queerness, and an introduction to the politics that my 'coming out' would entail within my Puerto Rican household. This is done through the context of the popular Latin American variety show 'Sábado Gigante'. The archival material is slowed down as a visual representation of looking back at a memory in the far past, which often can be hard to detail.



...is a hurricane, 2021

...is a hurricane is a series of protest signs, motivated by the countless signs created during the uprising in Puerto Rico in the summer of 2019. I reclaim the imagery of the hurricane, using a radar image of Hurricane María as it was passing over the island, and transform it into a representation of power, resistance, and revolt, not only to Puerto Ricans, but other marginalized communities I identify with.

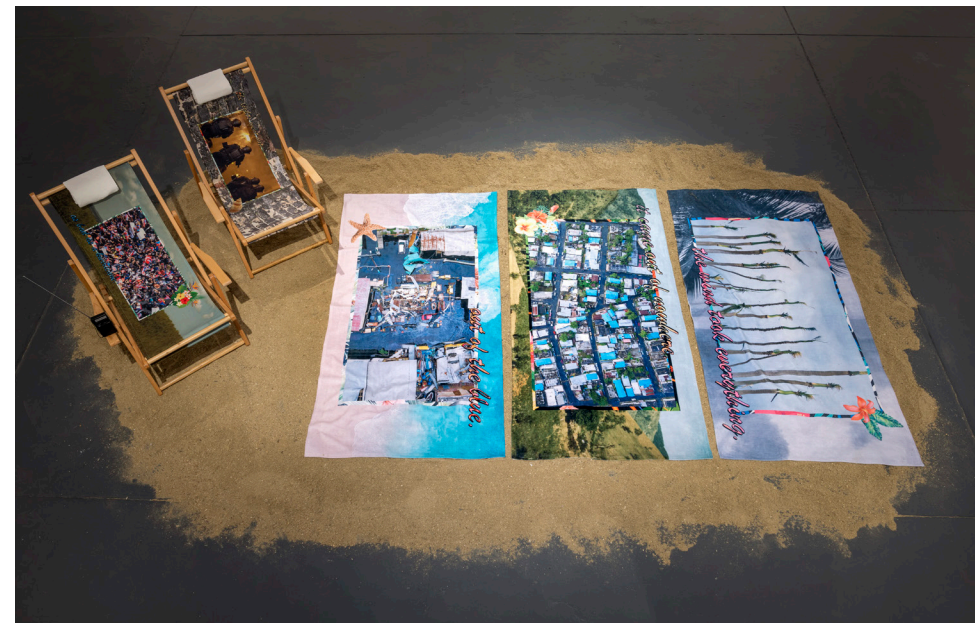
Self-portrait of a young jíbaro (collaboration with Doris Bonilla Ramos), 1996/2021

Self-portrait of a young jíbaro is a photograph taken by mother during my school's Christmas party, on December 20, 1996. As part of the festivities, the young students were dressed to represent different characters within the folklore of Christmas in Puerto

Rico. I was dressed as jíbaro, a term referring to the countryside people who farm and labor in the land. This image of el jíbaro was cemented during the proliferation of photography in Puerto Rico during the 19th century, often documented by US or European photographers. It has since become an iconic reflection of the Puerto Rican people.

While you dried in the sand, 2021

While you dried in the sand is an installation consisting of series custom beach towels, beach sling chairs, a portable radio and sand. Inspired by the souvenir towels and other products made specifically for tourist coming to Puerto Rico, these commodities usually contain stereotypical images, designs, colors, and fonts. I use this language to present recent moments that have continuously shed light on Puerto Rico's position as a colony of the US. Referencing moments such as the passing of the Hurricane María, the many protests during the summer of 2019, and the January 2020 earthquakes I appropriate this everyday material as a tapestry of catalyst moments within the recent history of the island and its people.



Inclination/Reclamation

danilo machado



While you dried in the sand (detail), 2021 • Photo by John Groo

>>> Is the sand from Puerto Rico?

>>> No, it's from Home Depot.

The ocean is far from Hartford, Connecticut, and yet at Real Art Ways two beach chairs sit on a bed of sand. There's a white rolled up towel ready for your head and on one of the arm rests is a radio filling the space with soft static. Next to the chairs are three open towels, also decorated with the usual tropical tropes. Getting closer, you also see that they contain images of hurricanes, police, and protest and text like "the wind took everything" and "it came out of nowhere." The installation, titled ***While you dried in the sand*** (2021), is part of Kevin Quiles Bonilla's solo exhibition ***As the palm is bent, the boy is inclined***. The materials conjure tapestry narratives and political collage while conveying the exhibition's overarching themes.

As the palm is bent, the boy is inclined visualizes some of colonialism's historic,

textual, and visual apparatus and tactics while simultaneously depicting its personal consequences on individuals and families. Questions of colonialism, queerness, and archive not only map onto mass produced media and objects, they exist in the artist's own body, family, and intimate community. Bonilla connects identities and histories; posing queer, camp, and community counter-strategies of survival and reclamation.

>>> What transparency?

The show's title riffs on the caption from a stereograph taken around 1899 by Strohmeyer & Wyman. Found in the archives of the Library of Congress, it is among thousands of other images taken by photographers from the United States and Europe of Puerto Rico. The doubled sepia image shows young children climbing coconut palms. Installed floating on four pins and activated by light, the transparency's shadow is bent like the palm trees it depicts.

The caption, *as the tree is bent the boy is inclined*, references a 16th century proverb, "as the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined."

The image, like many works in the exhibition, questions what is found in the archive and what is left out of them. Bonilla draws from institutional archives (like this from the Library of Congress), but also from collective and personal archives. Throughout, Bonilla interrogates their gazes and legibilities, asking what is left out of the frame and indeed what is bent. Just in the action of bending the language of the captions to be more specific, Bonilla signals a push against the visual colonization contained in this and many images.



Untitled (a proverb) [after Strohmeyer & Wyman, c. 1899] (detail), 2021 • Photo by John Groo

>>> What carries over?

The exhibition features a two-part C-Print from his blue tarp series (2018-Present), in which the artist connects his photographic and performative practices with the material, which was distributed by FEMA after Hurricane María. Recently, Bonilla used the material for the performances *Unearthing through Many* (2018) and *Presidential Alert (America, Lip-Synch For Your Life)* (2018) and the tarps are also seen in the overhead images in the towels.

In the left image, the artist stands centered on the sands of Vega Baja, engulfed in a blue tarp whose almost-sculptural shape is dictated by the wind. At the right, with an



Carryover (Blue tarp in Vega Baja/Coney Island) (detail), 2021 • Photo by John Groo

identical horizon line, a snowy image of Brooklyn's Coney Island. In the small strip of wall separating these prints is an entire diaspora.

>>> What is evident?

Also side-by-side are two childhood photographs of the artists, showing him touching common household objects, a light switch and a flush lever. In the images, Bonilla is

dressed in his pale blue school uniform, his arms extended and his gaze at the camera. Taken in 2002, they were meant as evidence for successful treatment of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder through exposure therapy.

>>>

What does it mean for a doctor to request photographic evidence? What trust is implied in the image over other kinds of tellings?

Bonilla's photos are truths and not-truths, considering memories as constructed through the lens of others, and refusing a singular reading.

>>>

I, too, watched Don Francisco host *Sábado Gigante* with my parents in the living room. My memories are even more glitched than Bonilla's slowed distortion, though waiting through what seemed like hours of commercials and skits to get to the singing contest where the Chacal would blow his horn and eliminate those whose renditions were not good enough.

In the segment that makes up *Untitled (Sabado Gigante)* (2021), five hunky men are each interviewed by Don Francisco. He can't help but comment on their flexing, oiled muscles.

They are first introduced by name and country of origin, but at the end they become the numbers on their short shorts again (pants long gone) as the audience (which seems to be all women) votes to declare Mister Musculo (Mr. Muscle). Don Francisco, his ears accustomed to discerning applause, declares number 5 the winner, who he had



Untitled (Sábado Gigante) (still), video (color, sound), 12 min. 25 sec.
Courtesy Kevin Quiles Bonilla

moments ago asked to mimic Tarzan.

In the narrative that unfolds through the video's bilingual captions, the erection that Kevin gets watching the segment is dismissed—a joke among jokes on the screen. “Don’t pay him any attention,” he’s told. Bonilla doesn’t understand. “It was a reaction out of my control,” the text narrates. “Afterwards we all stayed silent.”

In the last moments of the video, Don Francisco tells the audience that dimpled co-host Javier Romero insisted on giving the Mr. Muscle trophies and accompanying prize of \$1,000 himself, which he does.

>>>

I recently saw Kenneth Tam’s ***Silent Spikes*** (2021) in Times Square, where his slowed image of Asian American cowboys enveloped many screens for a few minutes leading up to midnight. Tam’s manipulation of the video, like Bonilla’s, underscores the performative nature of (racialized) masculinities.

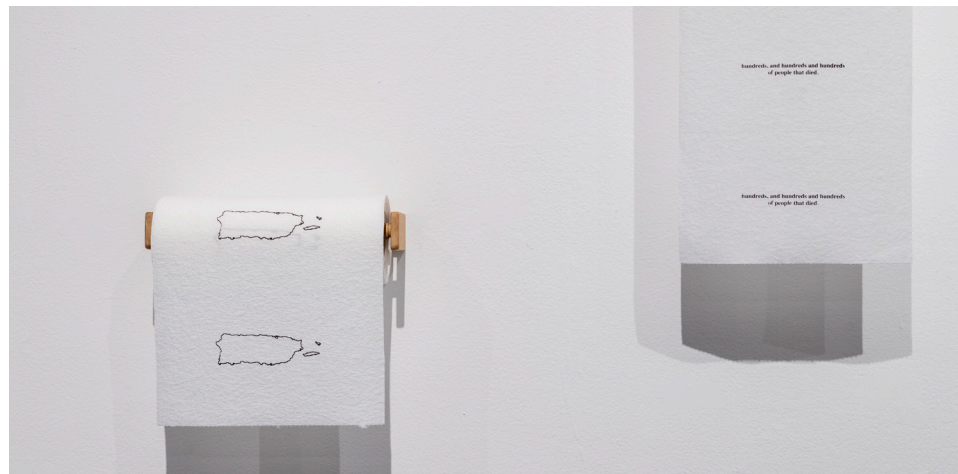
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I had to look up whether *Sábado Gigante* was still on the air, because the show seems both stuck in and beyond time. The show ended in 2015, but I couldn’t tell you when exactly I stopped watching with my parents, or when they stopped watching.

In the same search, I am reminded that Don Francisco’s name is not Francisco at all, but Mario Luis Kreutzberger Blumenfeld.

>>> What is absorbed?

The actions of another game show host are referenced in ***To absorb and contain*** (2021). In October 2017, during his brief visit following the devastation of Hurricane María, the former US President got up on the podium and threw paper towel rolls as 90% of the island remained without power. “A great day in Puerto Rico,” he tweeted.



To absorb and contain, (detail) 2021 • Photo by John Groo

Bonilla reclaims this material and prints each sheet of eleven hanging rolls by hand with words from the former President, former governor of Puerto Rico, and from protestors. The gesture exposes the incompetence of federal response and honors the activism of the people of Puerto Rico, awakened and fearless.

>>> Somos mas

>>> We are more

There’s a sense of scale in the works, a kind of small infinity in the towel’s rolling and in the physical presence of the installation. The words, numbers, and images presented on the towels repeat even when only some of the sheets are visible. This echoes the enormity of the lives lost during the aftermath of the hurricane (repeatedly denied by the presidential administration) and the mass mobilizations which followed (and, in 2019, resulted in the ousting of the governor).

>>>

Protest is also present in the exhibition’s takeaway posters, stacked on the ground in another nod to Felix Gonzalez Torres. (Bonilla’s [un]titling between parentheses is another conjuring of the artist, who too considered the marginalized body through minimalist, conceptual installations, takeaways, and photographs.)

The posters, which declare every queer, crip, and Puerto Rican a hurricane, are a reclamation and call to rally. Again, Bonilla connects his personal, intersecting identities with broader collective communities.

>>>

On the subway, I catch a glimpse of a subway ad that reads *In NYC, a lot has changed. Your hurricane evacuation zone has too.*

>>>



...is a hurricane (detail), 2021 • Photo by John Groo

If diaspora is forgetting, how good are images at remembering?

Who is the other and how do they gather?

How can the lessons singular to our experience connect to the uncountable many?

These are more of the questions that keep spiraling within and beyond Bonilla's work. I know that the answers, if they come, will be many and will be bent.



As the palm is bent, the boy is inclined, (installation view) 2021 • Photo by John Groo

>>>

Born in Medellín, Colombia, danilo machado is a poet, curator, and critic living on occupied land interested in language's potential for revealing tenderness, erasure, and relationships to power.

Their writing has been featured in *Hyperallergic*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *ArtCritical*, *Art Papers*, *Poem-A-Day*, *GenderFail*, *Long River Review*, *TAYO Literary Magazine*, and alongside exhibitions presented by CUE Art Foundation, Abrons Art Center/Boston Center for the Arts, and No Longer Empty. An honors graduate of the University of Connecticut and 2020-2021 Emerge-Surface-Be Fellow at the Poetry Project, danilo is Curatorial Assistant at Socrates Sculpture Park, Producer of Public Programs at the Brooklyn Museum, and the curator of the exhibitions ***Otherwise Obscured: Erasure in Body and Text*** (Franklin Street Works, Stamford, CT, 2019-2020), ***support structures*** (8th Floor Gallery/Virtual, 2020-2021), and ***We turn*** (EFA Project Space, 2021).



About Real Art Ways

Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States, with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.



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Andy Warhol

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



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