



# The Museum *of* The Old Colony

*An Art Installation by Pablo Delano*

Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture  
University of Maryland Baltimore County

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*Essay by* MAURICE BERGER

Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture  
University of Maryland Baltimore County



# EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN:

## Pablo Delano's *The Museum of the Old Colony*

I detest the colonial system because that system embodies the death of the spirit, it is the degradation of man by man.

ROMÁN BALDORIOTY DE CASTRO (1822–89)

*Puerto Rican educator, political activist, and abolitionist*

In a passage from the infamous 1906 book *Down in Porto Rico*, George Milton Fowles states emphatically that the United States must act quickly to “Americanize” the people of Puerto Rico, the Caribbean island it invaded and colonized beginning in 1898. The text is as infuriating as it is arrogant, resonating with turn-of-the-century colonialism, imperialism, and racism: “The most prolific source of the misunderstanding that really exists between Porto Ricans and Americans is the inability to converse freely in a common language,” the text warns. In its warped logic, it is English and not Spanish that must be the default language of enlightened communication.

This illuminating text, photographed from the book and enlarged on a wall panel, appears in artist Pablo Delano’s epochal installation, *The Museum of the Old Colony*. For the past twenty years, Delano, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico, has collected artifacts related to the history of his homeland. In the process of amassing a substantial archive, he began to think about the ways he could, as a visual artist, employ these materials to explore this history. Delano creates dynamic, site-specific art installations that examine the complex and fraught history of U.S. colonialism, paternalism, and exploitation in Puerto Rico. They challenge, as well, the ways traditional museums of history and anthropology tell this story.

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› Pablo Delano (found object)  
*Old Colony Soda Bottle*  
c. 1950s  
Mayagüez, Puerto Rico

“My entire output as an artist has been shaped by my upbringing and my love for Puerto Rico, but in the last years I’ve felt an urgency to address the plight of the island more directly in my work, to address it head-on,” says Delano. “Puerto Rico has always existed in a sort of limbo, but I wanted to focus on the years of U.S. domination, since the 1898 military invasion, on the consequences of U.S. rule over that period.”

The “Old Colony” of the installation’s title is a “play on words, referencing both the island’s political status and a popular local soft drink,” as the journalist and photographer David Gonzalez wrote in the *New York Times*. Spanning more than a century of objects, images, and clips from film and television, Delano’s installation illuminates the oppression of the past while alluding to the stark reality of Puerto Rico in the present—an unincorporated territory of the United States where U.S. citizens continue to be exploited, ignored, and underrepresented. It provides ample evidence that “the relationship between the island and American authorities has been unequal from the start,” as Gonzalez noted.

The devastation of Hurricane Maria in 2017—and the inadequate federal response that has resulted in widespread displacement, suffering, and death—underscores the second-class status of Puerto Rico throughout history. *The Museum of the Old Colony* asks us to imagine—through the viewing of images and objects—the powerful connection between past and present: lurid and exoticized images of the devastation, exploitation, economic decline, and abandonment that remain tragically salient and topical. Despite the massive modernization process that Puerto Rico underwent in the mid-twentieth century, the crumbling infrastructure and continued political disenfranchisement remind us that in some ways little has changed over the years. “I was struck by how similar the 1899 pictures looked to the ones we’re seeing of Hurricane Maria,” the artist told the *New York Times* about photos of the damage caused by the historic San Ciriaco hurricane. “Some of the photos were taken in the same towns and streets. They were difficult to look at because to me they suggested visually that maybe we are back where we started. They raised the question: What has been the outcome of this century of occupation?”

*The Museum of the Old Colony* functions simultaneously as artistic statement, social activism, and institutional critique. It is commensurate with the work of Fred Wilson, Mark Dion, and Pepón Osorio, artists who

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› Pablo Delano (found object)

*Puerto Rico Bobblehead  
Souvenir Figure*  
Mid-20th century  
Painted porcelain

› Pablo Delano

*An Outing (detail)*  
2019  
Pigment print on Hahnemühle  
rag paper  
36 x 24.5 inches  
Page from *Annual Report of the  
War Department for the Fiscal Year  
Ending June 30 1899: Report of the  
Major General Commanding the  
Army, Part I, Government Printing  
Office*, Washington, DC. Original  
photo caption: “The above shows  
the American enjoying himself  
in the tropics. After walking two  
or three miles in the hot sun,  
nothing can quite refresh one  
as to drink the water from one  
or two cocoanuts. The native lad  
has just been up the tree and cut  
down as many as the ‘Americanos’  
wanted. The cocoanuts are also  
sold on the streets of the Capital  
every morning and are a pleasant  
and healthy drink.”





It is the desire of the Americans, and of many of the Porto Ricans, that this people be “Americanized” as soon as possible. How is this to be done? Not by reading Spanish literature, for there is not much of a complimentary nature to be found there, while there is much hostility toward Americans and American ideals. Not by talking in Spanish to Americans who live on the Island, for very few of them can express themselves well in that language. The most prolific source of the misunderstandings that really exist between Porto Ricans and Americans is the inability to converse freely in a common language. That common language will not be Spanish. Of necessity it must be English.



create lavish, site-specific installations that simultaneously comment on broad social realities—from political oppression to repressive technologies—and on the institutions in which they temporarily reside. Fred Wilson’s groundbreaking 1992 installation at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, *Mining the Museum*, for example, juxtaposed objects from the museum’s permanent collection to explore the history of U.S. slavery and segregation as well as the problematic, and racially fraught, history of the institution itself.

Like these projects, *The Museum of the Old Colony* engages the museum as a contested site in which the imperatives and logistics of colonialism and domination, both within and outside the institution, are confronted and tested. The installation challenges viewers, both Puerto Rican and non-Puerto Rican, to confront a troubling and incriminating history. It challenges them, as well, to see themselves in the story of U.S. colonialism and imperialism, to question their passivity about or complicity with the ongoing disenfranchisement of their fellow citizens. Rather than certitude or clarity, the project engenders insight and self-awareness, inviting us to consider the disturbing evidence it presents. “I hope the viewer experiences a kind of personal reckoning,” Delano has said of this experience.

The project is also deeply personal for Delano, a means for the artist to better understand and come to terms with the troubling history of Puerto Rico. In the end, his cogent work liberates the story of a people from the stereotypes and blind spots of history, the museum, and popular culture. While grounded in history, and its stories and artifacts, *The Museum of the Old Colony* is not a work of social or art history. Rather, it is a powerful and moving work of art, “a personal reflection, from the gut,” as Delano calls it. “It’s not meant to be authoritative in any sense, or to represent anything but my own take on the past and present of the place I was born and raised, the one place in the world where to this day, even after living away from the island for so many years, I most feel that I belong.”

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› Pablo Delano  
... *It is the desire*  
*of the Americans* ...  
2019

Pigment print on Hahnemühle  
rag paper  
24 x 25.5 inches  
Excerpt from George Milton  
Fowles, *Down in Porto Rico*,  
New York: Eaton & Mains, 1906

**Dr. Maurice Berger**

*Research Professor and Chief Curator*

Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture







PORTO RICAN LAUNDRIES.

The laundries of Porto Rico are all open-air institutions, the power being supplied by muscular half-breeds or colored women. The dress of the washerwomen is very simple, consisting of a handkerchief or bandana tied over the head so as to cover nearly all the hair, and a gown which comes from the neck nearly to the ankles.

ABOVE

› Pablo Delano

*Porto Rican Laundries*

2019

Excerpt from F. Tennyson

Neely, *Neely's Panorama of Our*

*New Possessions*, New York

& London: 1898

FACING PAGE

› Pablo Delano (found object)

*Danaide*

Modern commercial reproduction

of classical Greek sculpture in the

collection of the Vatican Museums

Bonded stone

*The Museum of the Old Colony* was organized for CADVC by Research Professor and Chief Curator Dr. Maurice Berger. Earlier versions of this project have been deployed at Alice Yard Art Space (Trinidad and Tobago), the National Gallery of Jamaica (Kingston), the 7th Argentine Biennial of Documentary Photography (Tucumán), King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center at New York University (NY), Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico (San Juan), and Hampshire College Art Gallery (Amherst, MA). *The Museum of the Old Colony* resides in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico/Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico.

#### ARTIST BIO

Pablo Delano was born in 1954, in the “unincorporated territory of the United States” known as Puerto Rico. He was raised on a hillside just outside the capital city of San Juan. As a child, he enjoyed climbing a huge flamboyán tree and savoring a spectrum of fresh fruits including mangos, acerolas, and delicious pink guavas. After completing high school, he relocated to the U.S. East Coast to study art. He holds a B.F.A. from Tyler School of Art/Temple University and an M.F.A. from Yale University, both in painting.

In New York, he initially pursued a career as a painter, but quickly turned to photography, a skill he had learned from his father, the photographer Jack Delano. Photography seemed at that time to offer a more satisfying, interactive, and visceral connection to the world. Various substantial projects grew out of his early work done on the Lower East Side, including commissions from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. One unifying thread was a consistent interest in the life of Latinx and Caribbean communities.

In 1996, Delano accepted a teaching position at Trinity College, in Hartford, CT, where a colleague offered him the opportunity to travel to Trinidad and Tobago, in the Southern Caribbean. Fascinated by that nation’s process of post-colonial nation-building, he returned countless times over the next ten years, ultimately producing a book of black-and-white photographs titled *In Trinidad*. During his first years at Trinity College, Delano also began collecting archival images from Puerto Rico, and conceptualizing the project that would ultimately grow into his art installation titled *The Museum of the Old Colony*. In 2019, Delano was appointed Trinity College’s Charles A. Dana Professor of Fine Arts.

Museum of the Old Colony website:

<http://museumoftheoldcolony.org/>

Pablo Delano website:

<http://www.pablodelano.com/>

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- › Pablo Delano  
*Coco de Agua*  
2019  
Pigment print on  
Hahnemühle rag paper  
22.5 x 36 inches  
Enlargement from photo  
postcard, early 20th century
- › Pablo Delano  
*Result of the Hurricane at  
Yabucoa, P.R., August 8, 1899*  
2019  
Pigment print on Hahnemühle  
rag paper  
28 x 36 inches  
From *Annual Report of the War  
Department for the Fiscal Year  
Ending June 30 1899*, Government  
Printing Office, Washington, DC



RESULT OF HURRICANE AT YABUCOA, P. R., AUGUST 8, 1892

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University of Maryland Baltimore County

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Pablo Delano’s *The Museum of the Old Colony*”  
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#### ABOVE

- › *Official Stamp, The Museum of the Old Colony*  
2016  
Wood, rubber, ink

#### FRONT COVER

- › (installation view)  
Pablo Delano  
*The Museum of the Old Colony: The Museum Desk*  
2020  
Assemblage of found objects

#### BACK COVER

- › (installation view)  
Pablo Delano  
*The Museum of the Old Colony: Patriot Economy Eraser*  
2018  
Chalkboard eraser in plexiglass case  
Eraser: Gift of David Gonzalez to The Museum  
of the Old Colony





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