

## Print Article



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Puerto Rican secretary of economic development Jorge Silva Puras, with Celina Nogueras Cuevas and Roberto J. Nieves, at the opening of Circa '06



Works by Miguel Luciano (left) and Reynold Rodriguez at Circa '06



## MOMENT IN THE SUN

### by Ben Davis

The *San Juan Star* featured two stories on its front page on Saturday, May 27, 2006. One reported on **Circa '06**, the first ever commercial art fair in the Caribbean, declaring it "a success" and featuring a large color photo of **Andres Serrano** signing copies of his new book at the San Juan Convention Center. Above this story, the main headline blared the latest news about Puerto Rico's simmering fiscal crisis, which had recently provoked governor **Aníbal Acevedo Vilá** to lay off some 95,000 employees temporarily. The legislature, it seemed, was considering a punishing new 6.5 percent sales tax as a solution.

Proceedings at Circa, May 25-28, 2006, seemed very little infected by such circumstances. **Jorge Silva Puras**, Puerto Rico's secretary of economic development, even put in an appearance at the fair's VIP opening on Thursday evening, standing alongside artistic director **Celina Nogueras Cuevas** and Circa president **Roberto J. Nieves**, and speaking smoothly about "art as an instrument of economic development." The next day, **Sotheby's** Latin American art specialist **Maria Bonta de la Pezuela**, fresh from the record-setting sale of Latin American art in New York on May 24, offered a slick presentation at the **Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico** aimed at coaxing wealthy Puerto Ricans to spend at the auctions, cooing about the "stability of the art market."

At the convention center, **Miguel Luciano's** giant, inflatable head of Columbus (a notable expression of "festivalism," to borrow **Peter Schjeldahl's** term), dominated the center of the floor, and was as close as the event came to touching on local politics. Luciano, who had been invited by **Elvis Fuentes** to contribute an individual project to Circa, along with nine other artists including Serrano and **Nari Ward**, explained that his sculpture referenced a real, 300-foot-tall statue of the explorer that the Puerto Rican government had purchased, wasting vast sums of money on shipping before deciding to scrap the project, in what amounts to a timely symbol of fiscal hubris. The actual monument is currently rusting in pieces in an industrial lot.

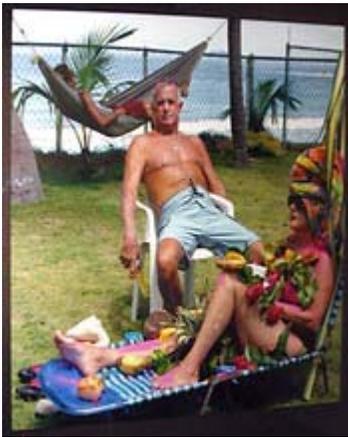
The project by another of Fuentes' 10 invited artists, San Juan-based designer **Reynold Rodriguez**, better incarnated the combination of visual culture and art-tourist-accommodating luxury for which such events are known. Rodriguez created a series of sculptural benches, each a snaking curve that twisted up into the air at one end, along with a spacey chill-out dome constructed of linked metal rings, turning Circa's center into a kind of groovy lounge.

Whatever reservations one might have about art fairs in general, it is hard to begrudge Puerto Rico its moment in the sun, with fair director Nogueras Cuevas enthusing that Circa offered a platform for local talent to "become visible in the international scene." **Galería Raíces** apparently agreed, rotating the works at its booth every day in order to give exposure to all of its represented artists. Such enthusiasm is infectious.

M.K. Kahne's *Spaceship* in "States of Anxiety" at Circa '06



Detail of work by Melvin Martínez at Walter Otero Gallery



**Carlos Betancourt**  
*Family Portrait -- Mami, Papi and Alberto*  
2005  
Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts



Photo of Rafael Trelles' *El loco II* by Johnny Betancourt, at Galería 356

In contrast to this optimistic air, Spanish curator **Paco Barragán** contributed "States of Anxiety," a modestly sized contemporary art survey mixed in with the commercial fare, occupying five stalls at one edge of the exhibition space. The show, Barragán explained, had grown out of a long-gestating plan for a major exhibition about anxiety in contemporary art -- but he had agreed to organize a smaller version for Circa out of, yes, anxiety that someone would steal his idea if he didn't act on it soon. To be fair, works like the busy linear abstractions by **Vargas-Suárez Universal**, or **M.K. Kahne's** sculpture featuring a German water plug packaged with a picture of an astronaut, seemed about as connected to the "anxiety" theme as any other artworks at Circa -- but the show offered a fresh and quirky selection of artists, nevertheless.

Barragán's mini-exhibit also managed to spotlight the painter of the hour, Puerto Rican artist **Melvin Martínez**, who won the €60,000 **Castellón Painting Prize** last November. Martínez's large paintings are heavily layered with glitter, fake jewelry and thick, frosting-like trails of paint, somewhere between Abstract Expressionism and kitsch, those old antagonists. San Juan's high-rolling **Walter Otero Gallery** was also hawking a pair of lively Martínez paintings, for \$7,000 and "in the neighborhood" of \$8,500, respectively. Members of the Miami-based Rubell clan, who swung by Circa (and also have a show of the **Rubell Family Foundation** collection of new media art at the **Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico**, through June 11, 2006), were rumored to be eyeing them.

There was something about glitter in the air, as it also figured heavily in Puerto Rican player **Carlos Betancourt's** offerings at Miami's **Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts**. *Re-Collection* (2006) offered up a pile of glitter-encrusted shells and trinkets, piled in a corner as if to rewrite **Felix Gonzales-Torres'** poetic heaps of treats as tourist trinkets, while Betancourt's photo-based work at the booth displayed his trademark sun-addled wackiness. Most effective was *Family Portrait* -- *Mami, Papi and Alberto* (2005), a scene of a man lazing in the sun on a plastic chair, beer in hand, his sceptical gaze at the camera cutting nicely against the incongruity of the woman reclining in front of him, body covered with a bounty of tropical fruit.

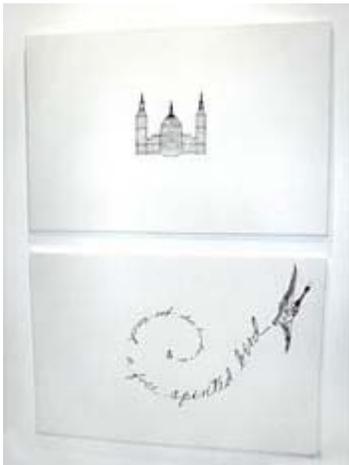
On the other hand, at **Galería 356** from San Juan, another veteran, **Rafael Trelles**, offered just the right dash of grit to make an impression. Literally: The long-time surrealist painter has taken to updating his repertoire by making street murals, using water to blast away the layers of grime encrusted on stone walls, carving pictures out of the resulting contrast between dark and light. This novel process is, of course, the real interesting thing about the pieces, and the gallery smartly showed a video documentary about their creation, along with various photos capturing the results, collaborations with **Johnny Betancourt**. *El loco II* offers the image of an enigmatic, shambling man, the white space of the scraped wall forming a kind of radiant halo around him, while smudges of dirt are set off as shadows of a human-headed dog at his feet. The photo of this work was \$2,500.

A particularly strong booth was that of **Bernice Steinbaum** from Miami, which displayed drawings on rock tiles of labyrinthine, science fiction cityscapes by Cuban artist **Glexis Novoa**. Novoa was another of the artists invited by Fuentes to provide a solo project, and his puzzling installation was one of the fair's highlights. Visitors had to wiggle into one of the narrow openings in the sides of a wooden booth in order to get a close look at a series of tiny pencil drawings scrawled on the walls inside, which featured silhouettes of great works of art being carried away by hot air balloons.

Steinbaum's stand was also showing work by Novoa's fellow Cuban expats **Elsoca & Fabián** (fresh from a show in New York at **Magnan**



Detail of project by Glexis Novoa at Circa '06



*The Palace* [top] and *What a confining cage* (both 2006) by Elsoca & Fabián, at Bernice Steinbaum Gallery



**Peter Sarkisian**  
*White Water*  
2005  
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery



Artist Jorge Rito Cordero with his video

**Emrich Contemporary**): two spare, elegant paintings, featuring castle-like cages and a delicately drawn bird in flight, painted using crushed fly parts on canvas. Looking close, one could see bird's feathers were made of insect wings, while the black ink contained faint traces of red. To give an idea of the geography-price connection in the international market, these inventive works were \$5,500 each, while two small sculptures by Californian **Peter Sarkisian**, also at Steinbaum -- small bowls, which with the help of projectors were made to appear as if nude women were bathing in milk inside -- were \$30,000 (Sarkisian has just concluded a show with **Steve McQueen** at the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.**)

The opening of Circa featured a number of performances, including a love spell cast by **Kelly Boehmer**, **Chuck Carbia** and **Rachel Hoffman**, employing a combination of voodoo masks, nymph costumes and guitar. None of the actions were quite as amusing as the video by **Jorge Rito Cordero** of a guerilla art piece executed at **ARCO** earlier this year, however. Rito Cordero, who represented himself at Circa in a small corner booth, is seen staggering into the Spanish art fair carrying a giant wooden cross. After guards are alerted to his uninvited presence, he quickly transforms the cross into a bench and plays dumb. They eject him anyway. A recent graduate of the **Escuela de Artes Plasticas de Puerto Rico** and a surfer, he was selling a disk that collected several of his performances for \$200.

One admires that kind of marketing pluck. As usual, however, the best work gets lost in the hubbub of commerce. One could have easily overlooked the small, silent video by Mexican artist **Graciela Fuentes** playing on a laptop in the corner of the booth of **Praxis, Mexico** (on sale for \$1,200). Fuentes' work focuses on a slowed down image of a crowd of young girls dancing, the camera holding one in particular in focus. The girl appears to be staring out at the viewer, but in fact the camera is equipped with a mirror, so that she is gazing at her own image. As the dancer observes her own movement, her gaze has a fierce, interrogating look, shoving aside others in order to observe herself as she wobbles to the music. A quiet and beautiful piece about self-image and vulnerability, Fuentes' video seemed all the more raw against the backdrop of art fair schmoozing.

So, what was the commercial verdict on this, the first art fair in the Caribbean? Walter Otero sold all the works in his stand, and other Puerto Rican dealers like **A. Cueto Gallery** and **Viota Gallery** reported strong sales -- though some of the international exhibitors, like **Magnan Projects** from New York, did only limited business. Artistically, most of the high points were from Puerto Rico or Latin America, though this is far from a negative thing to my eye (although, from the point of view of international art capital, it may be.)

On Friday, concluding the first full day of events at the convention center, the fair's Very Important People were bussed out to the pristine white house of **Alberto de la Cruz** (Coca-Cola's Puerto Rico chairman) to see the famous "de la Cruz collection" of contemporary art, which includes a stellar bunch of German Neo-Expressionists and at least one glittery, twilight blue Melvin Martínez. Amid hors d'oeuvres and cocktails, guests could hear the charismatic titan of business -- the kind of guy who can proudly display both a collection of exquisite **Gabriel Orozco** photographs of Africa and a picture of himself shaking hands with **George W. Bush** -- give a tour of his works. The evening could only strengthen the feeling that Circa was floating somewhere high above reality.

On the other hand, those lucky enough to conclude the night at another after-party at the important San Juan art space **Galería**



Gracieta Fuentes' *Saida* at Praxis,  
Mexico

**Comercial** (which had otherwise declined to participate in Circa) ended with a very different feeling. Guests were treated to an art performance by local artist **Bubu Negron** involving illegal betting. The affair came to a memorable end when the cops crashed in to bust up the game and disperse the participants -- a fine reminder that outside reality is always waiting to break back in, and that those moments are often the most memorable.

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The house of Alberto de la Cruz



Performance artist Rachel Hoffman in  
front of a work by Takashi Murakami at  
the de la Cruz house



Alberto de la Cruz gives a tour of his collection