

HAND PAPERMAKING

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 2 • WINTER 2021

<i>Note from the Board Chair</i>	2
PRELUDE — <i>Rooted & Returning: A Conversation with Krista Franklin</i> KELLY TAYLOR MITCHELL	3
<i>On Altars, Papermaking, and Spirituality</i> CANDY ALEXANDRA GONZÁLEZ	9
<i>A surrogate self, a site of memory: Firelei Báez</i> RE'AL CHRISTIAN	13
<i>Bearing Witness: The Artist Books of Tia Blassingame</i> JERUSHIA GRAHAM	17
INTERLUDE — <i>Why Paper</i> AKUA LEZLI HOPE	20
<i>The Stories We Carry: Collective and Individual Explorations at Taller Circular, Bogotá / Las historias que cargamos: Exploraciones individuales y colectivas en Taller Circular, Bogotá</i> VANESSA NIETO ROMERO	22
<i>Paper Sample: Cretona / Muestra de papel: Cretona</i> CESAR FAUSTINO & VANESSA NIETO ROMERO	30
<i>On View: "Preserved"</i> ANN JOHNSON	32
<i>Spiritual Activism: A Conversation with Renée Stout</i> DARICIA MIA DEMARR	36
<i>Building New and Alternative Worlds: A Conversation with Saya Woolfalk</i> JAZMINE CATASÚS	40
POSTLUDE — <i>History, As Written by the Victors.</i> KRISTA FRANKLIN	45
<i>Authors</i>	47
<i>Advertisers and Contributors</i>	48

FRONT COVER: Bogotá artist Vanessa Nieto Romero pulling the imprint from a rusted spring mattress. Courtesy of the artist. / Artista bogotano Vanessa Nieto Romero levantando la impronta de los resortes de colchón oxidados. Cortesía de la artista. BACK COVER: Krista Franklin, *We Wear the Mask I*, 2014, 19½ x 16 inches, collage on handmade paper. Courtesy of the artist.



*A surrogate self, a site of
memory: Firelei Báez*

RE'AL CHRISTIAN

Firelei Báez, Admidst the future and present there is a memory table, 2013, 40 x 60 x ¼ inches, pigmented abaca and linen on abaca base sheet with rapidograph opaque ink. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, Brooklyn.

“Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say.”¹ So go the opening lines of Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, in which she draws an inextricable link between the intangibility of memory and the concreteness of a physical place. In probing her personal history and reclaiming her homeland, she evokes an in-between space, a constructed space, something wrought out of the circumstances of historic dispossession and displacement. Much like Hurston, artist Firelei Báez (born 1981, Dominican Republic) explores the depths of in-between spaces while tracing the connections between memory, material, and the body. With visual references to migration and ritual, Báez generates spaces of diasporic connection—she brings together disparate bodies, but also considers how memories are embedded into the physical remnants, the “cold rocks” of a cultural history, creating a speculative future for the in-between.

Papermaking has offered Báez a unique way of expressing the connection between memory and material. In form, her works in paper recall other traditional artmaking techniques, from weaving to painting, but she combines these disciplines with motifs that draw upon the histories of the Caribbean and Global South: classicized images of women adorned with regal headdresses, pigments cultivated in the Americas like cochineal and indigo, along with tropical flora.² The artist has professed to falling in love with the paper studio Dieu Donné when she was



Firelei Báez, Patriarch, 2013, 58 x 31 x 3/4 inches, pigmented linen on abaca base sheet. Courtesy of Dieu Donn , Brooklyn.



Firelei Báez, *A Drexycen chronocommons (To win the war you fought it sideways)*, 2019, 373¼ x 447 x 157 inches (948.1 x 1135.4 x 398.8 centimeters), two paintings, hand-painted wooden frame, perforated tarp, printed mesh, handmade paper over found objects, plants, books, Oman incense, palo santo. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.

an undergraduate student at Cooper Union.³ During her residency at Dieu Donné in 2013, Báez produced a body of large-scale works that referenced modes of portraiture, landscape, and embroidery. In the process of marbling at the vat, Báez has discovered how wet paper reacts to varying degrees of touch and manipulation, and integrates elements of chance and play into intricate, improvisational compositions. “I followed an intuitive process, allowing the materials to inform the work made in my residency,” Báez has remarked. “I enjoy exploring new, unexpected ways of using materials, which is why I was drawn to pulp painting, marbling and collaging freshly pulled sheets.”⁴

In *Amidst the future and present there is a memory table* (2013), a figure (featureless aside from its eyes) is enveloped by a mesmerizing scarlet brocade, a quintessential example of Báez’s marbling technique. She creates figures against abstract backgrounds by using a subtractive process, in which she essentially carves the forms into wet pulp before collaging onto a base sheet.⁵ A vague silhouette floats in the background, while the central figure looks straight ahead, as if peering out to the viewer in the midst of a dreamscape. As the title suggests, the artist is interested in the fluid connection between bodies, but also temporalities, and how these connections relate to collective experiences. Her featureless figures gazing out at the viewer seem benevolent, but simultaneously unknowable with their indiscernible expressions. In other words, they maintain a “right to opacity,” to quote Édouard Glissant, who has long been a key influence for Báez. Across her practice, there are other traces of Glissant, namely in the metaphorical association of oceanic space as a site of diasporic memory and longing. Her 2019 installation



Firelei Báez, *Close detail of A Drexycen chronocommons (To win the war you fought it sideways)*, 2019, 373¼ x 447 x 157 inches (948.1 x 1135.4 x 398.8 centimeters), two paintings, hand-painted wooden frame, perforated tarp, printed mesh, handmade paper over found objects, plants, books, Oman incense, palo santo. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.



Firelei Báez, *Boomerang*, 2013, 58 x 39 x ¼ inches, pigmented abaca and linen on abaca base sheet. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, Brooklyn.

A Drexcyen Chronocommons (To win the war you fought it sideways) evokes the darkened hull of a ship, while visual motifs present throughout the space allude to the flora and fauna of the Caribbean. An ornately perforated blue tarp—a material of protection and refuge—engulfs the installation, in a sense sheltering all those who enter, while altars at either side of the space surrounded by books, plants, and found objects coated in handmade paper provide sites of tribute.

The artist only recently reflected on the centrality of water in her work; even before turning to papermaking, she painted with water-based pigments, owing to their fluidity and moveability. In the process of marbling and adding layer after layer of color to wet sheets of pulp, the barrier between medium and surface becomes increasingly fluid. In *Boomerang* (2013), for instance, the brilliant red pigment vibrates off the surface, while the pastel blues seem to hover in space. The green background balances out the disparate parts of the composition, while weaving the colors together into a vibrant tapestry.

Báez seeks to embrace flaws in her surfaces, and in doing so reveals the inherent beauty and fragility of handmade paper. She often uses linen pulp to this end, as the relatively short, delicate fibers give way to unique imperfections in her final design. Recently, she has described her works as a “palimpsest,” a page on which an image or text has been erased in order to be reused, but on which traces of the original form always remain.⁶ In observing her compositions on paper, such as *Patriarch* (2013), some areas of color appear pure and bold, while others are subdued and seemingly weathered. Through papermaking, Báez creates a surrogate for herself—an extension of her own hand—while also recalling

and reclaiming a cultural past through visual and textual hybridity.

Báez has referred to paper as a “surrogate self,” a material that becomes a kind of skin, unique in its imperfections, and imbued with personal histories.⁷ Like skin, paper acts as an archive, or palimpsest, a document of past narratives, a site of memory. But Báez resists the notion that an archive is always fixed. She instead asks us to consider how archives can be more forgiving, more susceptible to wear and tear. Like the creases and folds and subtle imperfections of handmade paper, mutability can be an acceptable part of the archival process, and by extension the act of recounting history.

NOTES

1. Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: HarperCollins, 1942): 18.
2. Firelei Báez in conversation with Isabel Custodio, *The Museum of Modern Art's Magazine* (November 18, 2018), <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/16>.
3. “Workspace Residency Program 2013: Firelei Báez,” video, 3:15, posted by Dieu Donné Papermill, November 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-1o3TNFeZE&t=9s>.
4. Báez quoted in *Pure Pulp: Contemporary Artists Working in Paper at Dieu Donné* (New York: Wellin Museum of Art and DelMonico Books, 2016): 112.
5. As noted in “Firelei Báez” on Dieu Donné’s website, accessed April 25, 2021, <http://residencies.dieudonne.org/firelei-baez/>.
6. Firelei Báez, interviewed by the author, April 19, 2021.
7. Dieu Donné, “Firelei Báez.”