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## ***Firelei Báez: Bloodlines*** The Andy Warhol Museum, February 17 – May 21, 2017

Nicole F. Scalissi

### Exhibition Review

Exhibition catalog: María Elena Ortiz, *Firelei Báez: Bloodlines*, exh. cat. Text by María Elena Ortiz, Naima J. Keith, and Roxane Gay. Miami: Pérez Art Museum Miami, 2015. 128 pp.; 65 ills (53 col.). Cloth \$35.00 (9780989854672)

Exhibition schedule: Pérez Art Museum Miami, FL, Oct. 15, 2015 – March 6, 2016; The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, February 17–May 21, 2017

### **About the Author**

*Nicole F. Scalissi's research focuses on American artists who stage violence against gendered, racialized, and classed bodies—marginalized identities with which the artists themselves identify—as a method of both community-identification and self-empowerment to call attention to the prevalence of disproportionate violence committed against women and people of color in the US more broadly. She is a PhD candidate in the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh and carries a master's degree from Pennsylvania State University.*

## ***Firelei Báez: Bloodlines***

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Metal keys of a kalimba plink as if plucked by a breeze. The twinkling soundtrack for the introductory video at the entrance of *Bloodlines* chimes throughout the gallery, creating a place apart from the rest of The Andy Warhol Museum, one awash in chromatic rhapsody and inharmonic sound. Organized by and first installed at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, and now in its second installation in Pittsburgh, *Bloodlines* is Firelei Báez's first major solo exhibition in the United States. Essentially an early career retrospective,

the exhibition takes over the second of the museum's seven floors with drawings and paintings that cut to the heart of Báez's project: making visible the lineages—bloodlines—among resistance movements of people of color in the United States and the Caribbean, and asserting the histories and global influence of subaltern cultures more broadly.

The trans-Caribbean narrative told in the exhibition is, in part, Báez's own. Of Dominican and Haitian ancestry, Báez (b. 1981, Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic; lives in New York) moved as a child from her native Dominican Republic to the United States, first to Miami then to New York, where she attended art school. While some artworks foreground her experience navigating a multifaceted identity, *Bloodlines* extends far beyond autobiography and appeals to a more nuanced understanding of historical connections across the Americas, questioning who is allowed to construct History with a capital "H."



**Figure 1**

Installation view of *Firelei Báez: Bloodlines* with (left to right) *Ciguapa Pantera (to all the goods and pleasures of this world)* (2015, acrylic and ink on paper, 69 x 95 in.) and *Body speaking to the space you fill up and keep* (2016, acrylic on Yupo paper, 80 x 60 x 4 in. framed), The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, photograph by Abby Warhola, 2017.

*Bloodlines* opens with *Body speaking to the space you fill up and keep* (2016), the only fully abstract painting on view (fig. 1). *Body speaking* is painted on Yupo, a smooth, nonabsorbent synthetic “paper” that ripples under the weight of the acrylic paint pooled on its surface. Swells of color—summery yellow, coral, cerulean—swim up to a seeping center of dappled mauves, dark greens, and lilacs. The layers of marbled, splashy color seem to be bleeding, giving the impression that *Body speaking* is still wet, in-process, mercurial. Báez sifts through the chancy washes to pin down the unfixed space conjured by color using delicate ink lines that sprout, hairlike, at the edges of swirls of paint. In doing so, she pushes the composition toward the recognizable but not to resolution, and ultimately worries the distinction between the representational categories of abstraction and figuration. Consider this Báez and curator Jessica Beck’s gentle greeting; ludic in composition and expeditious in its rewards, *Body speaking* demonstrates the satisfaction in slowing down and looking closely. Yet, its installation as the inaugural artwork is curious—*Body speaking* does not prepare you for *Bloodlines* and the uneasy cross-cultural confrontations and compressions that lay ahead.

*Bloodlines* is organized non-chronologically by Báez’s aesthetic interests over the last half-decade, six discrete moments relating clearly to the exhibition’s overarching concerns with empowered femininity, visibility, and resistance: full-length renderings of the *ciguapa*, the hirsute female trickster of Dominican folklore; large paintings that reimagine textile patterns to acknowledge uneven colonial relationships and subsequent political resistance; sumptuous portraits of Carnivale dancers that convey personal biography; portraits that directly question racial legibility or geographic belonging; and abstract paintings that play with time and memory. Some of these groupings are cross-gallery pairings that activate the space between, or operate on a sight-line framed by a series of ornate arches specially made for The Andy Warhol Museum presentation (fig. 2).



**Figure 2**

Installation view of Firelei Báez: *Bloodlines with Sans-Souci (this threshold between a dematerialized and a historicized body)* (2015, acrylic and ink on linen, 74 x 108 in.) as seen through the arches of the mural walls. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, photograph by Abby Warhola, 2017.

The main exhibition opens with a set of thirty monochrome self-portraits in a range of medium browns—sandy beige, pale clay, caramel—each featureless except for defined brown eyes that appear active, *looking*. Her gaze shifts from wide-eyed, playful glances skyward in the first row, to a frontal stare that hardens to a taunt, then despondently lowers. Báez color-matched paint to her forearm daily over the course of a summer month, her painted complexion darkening, lightening, and darkening again; her curls relaxing-tightening-relaxing across the thirty portraits hung in the uneven grid of a calendar. *Can I pass? Introducing the paper bag to the fan test for the month of June* (2011) stands out among her early work and economically conveys the stakes of *Bloodlines* through its aesthetic clarity and conceptual concision (fig. 3).



**Figure 3**

Installation view (left) and detail (right) of *Firelei Báez: Bloodlines with Can I pass? Introducing the paper bag to the fan test for the month of June* (2011, gouache, ink, and graphite on paper, 96 x 128 in. overall), The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, photograph by Abby Warhola, 2017.

Each color-matched painting references the Paper Bag Test, which calibrated the acceptable limit of brownness to the color of the standard paper bag in the United States: social clubs, churches, and colleges awarded privilege of entry to subjects whose skin was no darker than the bag.<sup>1</sup> The curly, uneven, and sometimes even kinky silhouette of her hair simultaneously suggests her African heritage and evokes the Fan Test, a similarly discriminatory test still in use in the Dominican Republic which tests the coarseness of women's hair using a fan's breeze. Both practices cast the internal stratification of communities of color into sharp relief, in tandem with the misguided but widely popular belief that people of lighter complexions—read: predominately European—were better suited to

<sup>1</sup> The test was especially popular in the American South during the first half of the twentieth century. See Audrey Elisa Kerr, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Washington, D.C.* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 2–19.

intellectual and social tasks. Báez points to both the ongoing legacy and continued internalization of these standards, while showing them to be mutable and inaccurate.

As I stand here, transfixed by thirty faces of Firelei Báez, I feel *Can I pass?*—and the rest of *Bloodlines*—as a physical presence opening itself up to my inclusion, not just my inspection. I found myself raising my own arm to find my place with Báez in June 2011 (today, under The Warhol's lights, I am June 15<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup>) and wondering if my own grandfather, a very darkly complexioned East Indian man, experienced this test after he crossed the Caribbean Sea for Howard University in 1945; wondering if he failed; wondering about the racial tests he didn't even know he was being subjected to in colonial British Guiana, and then in his adopted United States.

Báez's work is charged with subversive femininity and radical subjectivity—proud, staring, dark, hairy, corpulent, sexual, female bodies through which resistance is waged. Femininity is most aggressively exercised in *Man without a country (aka anthropophagist wading in the Artibonite River)* from 2014, a wall-filling cluster of miniature paintings and collages. Inspired by Persian miniature painting and Western illuminated manuscripts, Báez presences the Caribbean female body—or, more generally, the markedly subaltern body—through their super-imposition onto the pages of antiquated history and science books, literally inserting women into the pages of history. As the title signals, Báez takes up the selective cultural absorption, reinterpretation, and redeployment as artistic strategy famously articulated by Oswald de Andrade in his *Manifesto Antrópofago* (1928). In

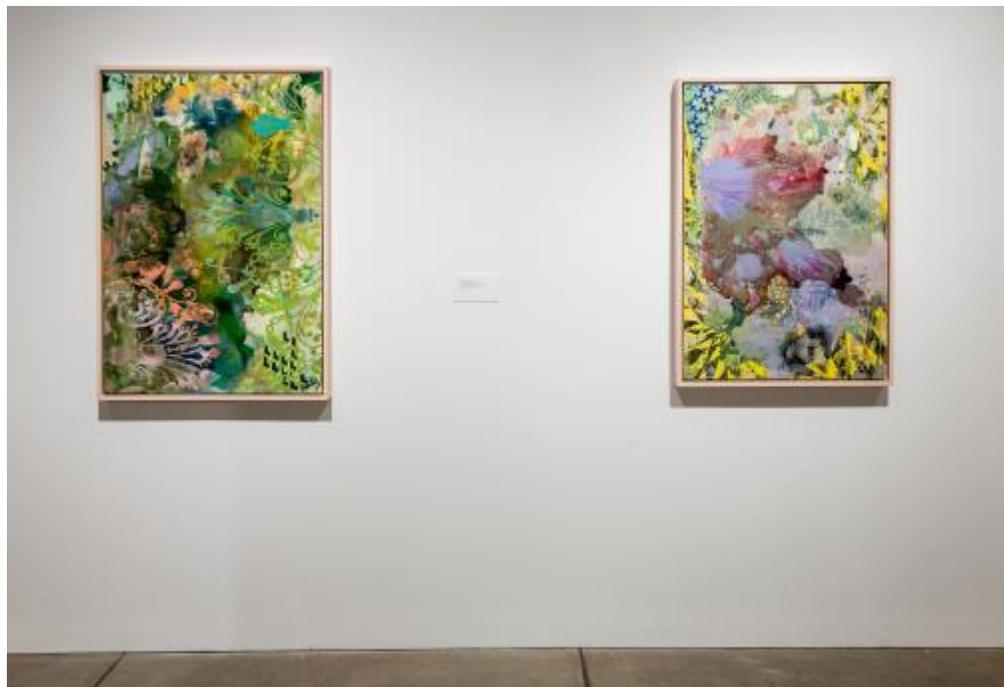
the Brazilian context, this cultural cannibalist philosophy empowered the appropriation of ideas and artistic styles of (at that time) dominant Europe as a radical aesthetic and political gesture. Báez appropriated female silhouettes from YouTube videos produced internationally, and patterned their limber poses with vibrant botanicals to evoke the landscapes of Hispaniola, thus marking their figures with Caribbean identity. Some of the paintings are humorous (sexy ladies sticking their hands up a stuffy man's nose), others are devastating, such as the tiny disheveled figures who exhaustedly trudge across an empty page as though through water, equally referencing the survivors of hurricane floods such as Katrina, or Haitian migrants crossing the watery border of the Artibonite River to seek a more prosperous future in the Dominican Republic. In her selective painting-out of the names and faces of (white, male) politicians with white paint or the spots of color-blindness tests, Báez enacts a contra-colonization of history through erasure and female figures that cross temporal, cultural, geographic borders.



**Figure 4**

Installation view of Firelei Báez: *Bloodlines with Those who would douse it* (2015, acrylic and ink on panel, 68 x 115 in.), The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, photograph by Abby Warhola, 2017.

The intersecting issues of gender and color (as prismatic chroma, dermal phenomena, and social concept) course through *Bloodlines*. Throughout, Báez integrates tropical flora with the female body, playing on the hair-like fibers of palm trunks or the inviting plush of mammalian fur to evoke the complex relationship of women and hair, seductively pressuring the limits of licit femininity. Through excessive tresses or total concealment of hair with flowers, flames, or fabric *coiffure*, Báez's interrogation of femininity and power in the next gallery, where three overwhelming, high-key color paintings hang on custom-built walls (fig. 4). Expanded from a smaller piece installed in Miami (a wall fragment with an unusable arch precariously propped up as sculpture), the colorful walls in The Andy Warhol Museum form a set of room fragments connected by archways, each painted in overlapping washes of indigo blue and real brewed coffee (an acknowledgment of the major, labor-intensive cash crop of South and Central America). Embellished with hand-painted symbols of radical political movements in both the United States and the Caribbean, each mural is covered in a filigree of lunging panthers of the Black Panther Movement; raised fists of the broader Black empowerment movements; and the *azabache*, another fist icon associated with protection and empowerment among several [Latin] American cultures. Báez and her team of painters—interns, volunteers, curators, and members of The Andy Warhol Museum's funded teen leadership program, the Youth Arts Council—literalized and appropriated the symbolic chains of oppression by using real ones to distress the murals. Roughed up by chains, pounded by hammers, and sliced by bladed tools, the wall bleeds its pulp and makes palpable the history of violence at the center of *Bloodlines*.



**Figure 5**

Installation view of Firelei Báez: *Bloodlines* with (left to right) *Trust memory over history* (2015, acrylic and ink on panel, 31.5 x 46.5 in.) and *The last one who remembers it* (2015, acrylic and ink on panel, 29.5 x 43 in.), The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, photograph by Abby Warhola, 2017.

We leave *Bloodlines* the way we began, wading through abstract swells of paint, this time hardened with geometric patterns and the symbols of resistance that run through the exhibition. Two small panel paintings displayed near the exit, *Trust memory over history* and *The last one who remembers it* (both 2015), dwell on memory, the human capacity that fundamentally allows for the recording of History yet is ultimately discredited by that which it

enabled (fig. 5). Memory here is presented as an act of resistance, the counter strategy of subaltern people to being left out of History. Perhaps what *Bloodlines* shows us is that those who have been colonized, their descendants, and those who have been erased from History experience time differently. In the mind of the colonizer, the occupation of the Other can be solidly in the past (*something our predecessors did*) without contemporary implication; for those colonized, the occupation persists as part of the present social, psychic, economic world, especially in the context of global commerce and identity. In *Bloodlines*, time before and during occupation are equally and simultaneously one with the present, in an uneasy contemporaneity with our now.



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