

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Immigrant Stories Dock at Governors Island in Two Exhibitions

Artists in both exhibitions were inspired by the harbor itself and how it has been a witness to immigrant narratives.

Peter Malone 6 days ago



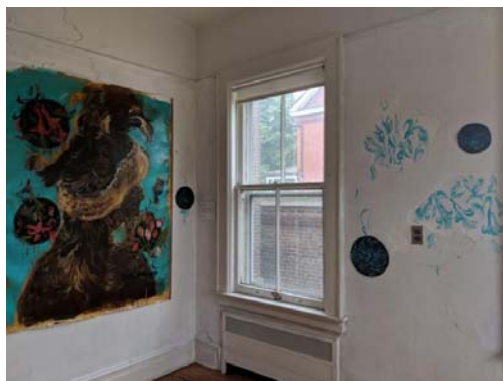
Jorge Luis Rodriguez, "The Missing" (2018), mixed media (photo courtesy West Harlem Art Fund)

There are two separate exhibitions installed in neighboring houses on Governors Island, both built in the 19th century for the families of military officers charged with the defense of New York Harbor. The work the artists chose to exhibit here, however, demonstrate a benign indifference to the intimate history embedded in the stairs, parlors, and bedrooms of their temporary exhibition spaces. Buffered from

their routine military past by more than a half century of disuse, the structures themselves held little interest for most of the artists. Instead, the harbor itself, its natural features and function as witness to immigrant narratives, provided the inspiration.

Aside from their general similarities, the exhibitions reflect very different curatorial styles. *Early Encounters*, organized by Savona Bailey-McClain of the [West Harlem Art Fund](#), is designed to prevail over the dilapidated condition of the walls and ceilings. Contending with peeling paint and broken plaster, the artists manage a surprisingly effective contemplative atmosphere. With each participant assigned to a room, the work transcends the house's frayed condition with quiet aplomb.

Taking a different approach, the artists in *Island Universe* were encouraged by curator and participant Irina Danilova of *Project 59* to bring a gleeful spontaneity to their show, partly through collaborations, as half the participants are pairings of artists. With more than double the roster of *Early Encounters*, yet confined to similar spatial limitations, they used every room and nook, every physical anomaly, every bit of surrounding detritus to make it their own. What the show lacks in formality is offset with buoyancy and wit.



Installation view of Scherezade Garcia
(photo courtesy West Harlem Art Fund)

Standouts in *Early Encounters* include Jorge Luis Rodriguez's “The Missing,” which wraps a sunny upstairs room with corrugated panels, each painted with a figure that sinks mysteriously into abstract motifs. Referencing souls who left no mark on history other than the space they once occupied, the room is transformed into a memorial of the insignificant who passed through the nation’s harbors. Scherezade Garcia's unstretched

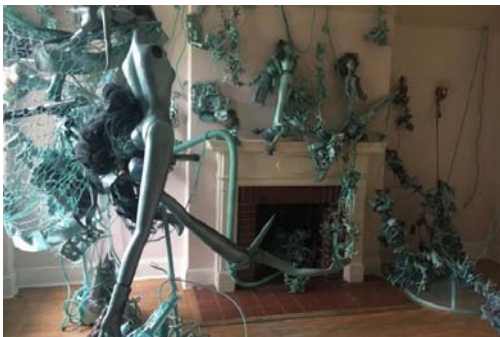
paintings are based on Baroque portraiture, though revised with swarthy complexions and floral designs based on both Dutch and native New York species. Similar floral notes were also painted into several patches of wall exposed by fallen plaster.

The most effective use of space is also one of the simplest. Emilia Garcia’s “community/light/nature/home” consists of rustic chairs tied together in the daylight of a small parlor, as if engaged in conversation — a poignant reminder of the comfort an immigrant seeks in familial bonds, and a prescient comment on the disastrous events continuing at our southern border.



Wall piece by Irina Danilova & Hiram Levy;
video by Billy X. Curmano, "Death Valley
Desert Classic" (1999)
(photo courtesy Project59, LLC)

In *Island Universe* the work was created and installed with considerable overlap. The walls along the stairs to the second floor are painted by Dasha Zibrorva, with a garden mural featuring plants that look back at you. Above your head fly Ed Herman's "Street Kids" catching your attention at approximately the same moment you become aware of sunlight reflected off the water and onto the walls of a corridor — an illusion Irina Danilova and Hiram Levy created with little more than mylar, a small lamp, and a tiny electric fan. Both Margaret Roleke and Alyson Pou each made use of a full room. Roleke's "Sea Green Mist" crisscrosses her space with strings of plastic toys and debris that are both whimsical and attentive to the issue of trash carried on the outgoing tide, while Pou's "Island Flight" utilizes an antique 19th-century frock in an installation of small, sculptural birds, some of which sit on wigs as if they were nests. Its domestic and maternal references to the room's actual history is an exception to the show's expanded thematic scope.



Margaret Roleke, "Sea Green Mist" (2018),
mixed media (photo courtesy Project59,

Though the structures on Governors Island have been selected for preservation, ostensibly to rekindle their historical import as symbols of 19th century homeland security, their current function as temporary art venues invites a living and very contemporary expression of what the island's defenses were

LLC)

culture.

defending: a city that, for more than three centuries, has been a garden of transplanted



Alyson Pou, "Island Flight" (2018) (detail)
(photo courtesy Project59, LLC)

Early Encounters continues at 404A Colonels Row at Governors Island, New York through July 8. Island Universe continues at 407A Colonels Row at Governors Island, New York through July 8.

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