

Multinational Illumination Art,
1,849 Millas: Al otro lado del charco, A Diaspora Journey

May 24–June 28, 2024



Triclope, 2022, coconuts, resin, coconut roots, screws, enamel paint

A Diaspora Journey
by Beatriz Flores and Shirley Verrico

In Puerto Rico, there is a saying “al otro lado del charco” which means “on the other side of the pond” in regards to *Boricuas* who have left the archipelago for the mainland United States. The title of this project references the 1,849 miles between Buffalo and the island of Puerto Rico. In that space, there is a universe of stories and experiences that are often unseen by those living in the continental US. *1,849 Millas: Al otro lado del charco, A Diaspora Journey* is an exhibition, performance, panel discussion, public forum, and workshop series in partnership with El Batey Puerto Rican Cultural Center. This series focuses

on African and Indigenous cultural expressions from Puerto Rico, including bomba music and the *vejigante* masks of Loíza.

Central to the *1,849 Millas* project is the exhibition of traditional *vejigante* masks made by Multinational Illumination Art, a husband and wife collaboration between artists Deborah Canales and Benjamin Cirino. Both Canales and Cirino were born and raised in Loíza, Puerto Rico, and currently live in Buffalo, NY. The *vejigante* masks hold a special place in the heart of Loíza, Puerto Rico, a small coastal town with a deep African

heritage and a large population of African descendants. Unlike in other parts of Puerto Rico, masks of Loíza are carved from abundantly available coconut husks rather than *papier-mâché*. The *vejigante* masks are traditionally worn during carnival celebrations, where performers dress as colorful and fearsome characters to chase away evil spirits and bring joy to the community. Originally, participants carried an inflated goat or cow bladder (*vejiga*) on a stick, which is how the character got its name, *vejigante* (bladder-carrier). These celebrations can be traced back to the mid-19th century in Puerto Rico. The *vejigantes* represent the Muslim Moors in the Catholic festival of the Feast of Santiago. This festival, also known as the Festival of Saint James, celebrates the ouster of the Moors from Spain. In Loíza, where the population is primarily of African descent, the figure of the *vejigante* has been reclaimed as a strong and unapologetic character with a history of survival and a connection to Africa. For the people of Loíza, the *vejigante* is the hero fighting against the colonizing Christians.



Cacique, 2023, coconuts, branches, snail shells, resin



Viva Vida, 2022, coconuts, resin, glitter, rocks, LED lights, branches, screws, acrylic, enamel, branches, rhinestones

The masks on display for *1,849 Millas* are handcrafted with meticulous attention to detail, using coconut husk with vibrant and bold colors. Similar folk characters can be found across the African and Caribbean diaspora. *1,849 Millas* pays tribute to the African roots of the *vejigante* tradition, incorporating intricate color patterns directly connected to Loíza and its vast and vibrant African heritage. Many of the masks combine two separate characters within a single sculpture. Some, like *Hipocritus*, 2022, and *Cacique*, 2023, can be presented with the coconut half-shell as the base and palm branches as a headdress, but function just as well when the mask is inverted converting the palm branches into the base and the coconut shell into the headdress. These two views are utterly distinct, presenting two characters in one mask. Other examples, like *Resilient*, 2024, and *Viva Vida*, 2022, present two distinct profile views that disregard symmetry. Here we see two sides of each character. The masks offer a visual representation of the duality that so often accompanies the Puerto Rican diaspora experience; US citizens who are also treated as “others.”

The *1,849 Millas* project not only honors this magnificent *vejigante* mask tradition but also captures Loíza's cultural complexities, blending the traditional with the contemporary. Adding exuberance with lights and non-traditional painting techniques, the masks reveal stories of the Puerto Rican journey; aspects of hope, joy, and celebration. In addition to infusing natural elements of the familiar, the colors added to the painted masks represent various cultural influences that connect the diaspora and in many ways transform it as traditions travel from Africa to the Caribbean and the continental US. For the *1,849 Millas* project, the *vejigante* mask traditions stand as a testament to the power of art as a critical tool in preserving traditions and expanding the understanding of Latin-American and Caribbean peoples' experiences, struggles, and perseverance. These masks are true symbols of the spirit of Loíza, Puerto Rico, and the enduring legacy of its people even as they find themselves so many miles away from home.



Hipocritus, 2022, coconuts, branches, LED lights, rocks, acrylics, enamel, glitter, screws, resin (inverted)



Hipocritus, 2022, coconuts, branches, LED lights, rocks, acrylics, enamel, glitter, screws, resin

Bio: Beatriz Flores

Beatriz Flores is the founder and Executive Director of El Batey Puerto Rican Cultural Center, an organization with a mission to honor and empower Puerto Rican people through culture, music, and history. Flores believes that bomba is the encapsulated expression of Puerto Rican history and ethos, as well as a vehicle for social change. Born in Fajardo, Puerto Rico, Flores maintains close ties to the island and their cultural practitioners and activists, often traveling to the island to continue her training while also bringing a number of experts to Buffalo to lead workshops and forums. Her cultural and historical knowledge and Puerto Rican networks are invaluable to the success of the *1,849 Millas* project. Flores introduced Buffalo Arts Studio to the artists and many academics and activists participating in this project.



Image courtesy of Nilson Rivera Photography

Bio: Multinational Illumination Art

Deborah Canales and Benjamin Cirino were born and raised in Loíza, Puerto Rico, and currently live and work in Buffalo, NY. Cirino was raised in a family of artists and artisans who passed their traditions from generation to generation. His father carved wood and made jewelry, his uncle made guitars, his mother was a doll-maker, and his sister works with fiber and is a traditional dancer. At an early age, Cirino watched his brother Luis Cirino, “El Yipo,” work intensely on traditional *vejigante* masks with the distinguished master mask craftsman Orlando Tomasini—who made masks for the annual Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol. After being mentored by Tomasini himself, Cirino furthered his art practice by learning from cultural visual artist Daniel Linn. Having found a natural talent in tradition, Cirino began his own workshop shortly after. Canales, whose artistic practice includes seashell doll-making as well as mask-making, began studying these crafts at the age of 14. Cirino and Canales, who have been working together for over two decades, formed the

Multinational Illumination Art collective in 2023 to educate communities about the roots of the *vejigante* masks tradition, ensure that the cultural legacy continues into the future, and teach new generations about the art of carving *vejigante* masks. Multinational Illumination Art maintains traditional carving practices while also incorporating their own innovations to realize their personal vision without losing sight of the *vejigante* mask-making legacy.

Multinational Illumination Art’s work has been shown regionally at venues including the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center in Niagara Falls, NY (2023); El Batey Puertorican Center in Buffalo, NY (2023); Taste of Diversity Festival in Buffalo, NY (2023); and nationally at Museo de Arte e Historia in San Juan, Puerto Rico (1995) and Centro Cultural Loíza in Loíza, Puerto Rico (1999). Their work was also featured in the annual Festival of Saint James the Apostle (Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol), a festival that combines local religious and folklore traditions to honor Loíza’s patron and defender.

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