

Redrawing History: Miguel Luciano's Subversion of Consumerism through Culture
— **Chen Tamir**

What does colonialism have to do with commodity culture? How does what we buy, or what we're sold, affect who we are? What are the lasting legacies of violent histories and how can they be redeemed today? Miguel Luciano contemplates these questions in his artwork. While he examines them through a local Puerto Rican lens, the issues he mines are relevant and urgent to all.

Luciano is Puerto Rican and American. To some, these terms mean the same thing, and it is this complexity that Luciano illuminates, not flinching from the inherently multifaceted issues that this contested identity invokes.

As Luciano says, Puerto Rico is effectively an American colony. Its inhabitants are eligible for service in (and have been drafted by) the American army, yet they cannot vote in federal elections. Their political status is exceptional in the modern world, yet their liminal citizenship is a lucid example of other disenfranchised and displaced groups around the world like the Palestinians, Tibetans, Kurds, and countless others.

Puerto Rico is a source not only of canon fodder — or of land to test bombs on or ecosystems to trifle with — but also of consumers. Its per capita income is less than half of the lowest per capita income state in the mainland U.S. and less than a third of the overall for the U.S.¹, yet proportionally they spend much more². Puerto Ricans have consistently broken sales records. Consumer fads are as profitable as they are fleeting. Big box stores thrive on the tiny island and fast food chains are almost as numerous as palm trees³.

Luciano explores this rich paradox in a variety of media. His paintings consist of layers. He collects a wide variety of visual resources, from historical children's books to product labels,

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/us.html#Econ>

² In fact, in 2005 Puerto Rico's personal consumption increased by 2.8% while the overall increase in the U.S. was only 0.9% (according to <http://www.whitehouse.gov/fsbr/output.html>)

³ A good survey of the melding of Puerto Rican culture into a marketing tool can be found in Arlene Davila's "Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico" (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

repainting them on large sheets of paper and canvas. He then adds contemporary symbols but makes the surface look aged and weathered, almost as if he's filling in the missing elements, insinuating that what seems trivial today will become embedded in our history tomorrow.

Wonderful examples of re-drawing history can be seen in the *Louisiana Porto Ricans* series of paintings, three of which are included in this exhibition. En route to Hawaii as cheap labor, some Puerto Ricans settled in Louisiana and were put to work on farms. In these works, Luciano has taken vintage yam packaging that depicts racist notions of Puerto Ricans in the old south. One "Bunny" brand produce package reflects the discriminatory trope of Puerto Rican reproductive rates. Luciano links this to the contested history of population control and the continuing practice of female sterilization⁴. Sterilization was endorsed under racist principles of eugenics and implemented as official policy in the late 1930s. Later, as birth control pills were being developed, they were tested on Puerto Rican women. Today, Puerto Ricans still widely practice sterilization, yet they host the world's largest producers of Viagra. In fact, the pharmaceutical industry is the largest in Puerto Rico, and mainland and foreign-owned companies decimate the ecosystem and deplete the island's resources while sending the profits elsewhere. Barceloneta, which replaces Sunset, Louisiana in the background of the "Bunny" packaging, is the island's apothecary and home to several pharmaceutical plants. A link is made to Nazi eugenics programs with the grocer's name, Aryon G. In this painting, lab rabbits don the familiar form of the Trix and Quik rabbits. One eagerly drinks a poisonous green philter while the other has cut off his own "lucky" foot. Dotting the painting are other rabbits that have magically been pulled from various hats. Some are in the colors of Puerto Rico's political parties, indicating that impotence is not just sexual, it can take a political form as well. An old native motif of a rabbit has been added to the picture, but its crossed-out eyes mark its death, alluding to the fate of the Tainos (a now obliterated native Puerto Rican tribe), which might befall us as easily as it befell them.

In *Exterminio de Nuestros Indios* (Extermination of our Indians) the figure of a conquistador, taken from an illustrated children's book of Puerto Rican history, is replaced by Ronald McDonald. Luciano connects this history to the present, turning the colonizer into a corporation and leading the

⁴ Remez, L. "Puerto Rico: Contraceptive Use Is High, Sterilization Is The Most Popular Method," in *Family Planning Perspectives*, Jan/Feb 1999.

viewer to identify the slain Taino Indian with today's "natives," the Puerto Ricans. The spoils in the conquistador's raised hand have been supplanted with modern equivalents, the all-American hamburger and fries.

In *Cosmic Taino*, Luciano has taken an historical children's illustration of a standing Taino shaman empowered with symbols of cultural pride and spiritual insight. Red beams have been added, matching the energy circles on which he stands and the ornament on his body. They emanate from his eyes, enhancing the power to see and project onto the surrounding world. This shaman is a symbol of our potential to resist consumerism, urging us toward a spiritual awakening beyond our material world.

Questions of spiritual resistance, cultural pride, and conquest are extremely complex. We use illustrations to teach children how these forces have played a part in constructing a shared history. From childhood to adulthood, images are ingrained in our understanding and creation of worldviews. Luciano underscores this visual language in his work, pointing out the contradictions in our surrounding images and showing us they can be redrawn to tell a different story.

The figure of the shaman is a recurring motif in Luciano's revised "stories." He can be seen in another painting, *Third Eye Assistance*, in which the Taino has donned a T-shirt in place of traditional dress. His dinner-plate eyes beam not with insight but with want. His empty covetous glance is multiplied and eclipses the dignified shamans in the background. Like eyes, hands are important markers in this work. The Tainos' palms are contrasted to an illustrated hand painted above and pointing to the new, eager figure as if God himself were infusing him with the spark of life. Only this time, Adam (the beaming Taino) is about to embark on the "true" journey of life: consumerism, which is reason enough for equivocating between laughter and tears. A false crown is perched on his head, ordaining him the king of unrealized potential and oblivious craving. Overlaid on the image are yet more hands, these in Disney-style caricature. Acquisitive eyes and hands betray how we (insofar as the Taino is a reflection of ourselves) have morphed from a dignified, productive past to a greedy, consumer-driven present. We see first what we take (or buy) later.

Luciano addresses these perils by infusing Puerto Rican culture with the pride of its colors. One motif through which he accomplishes this is the plantain. Native to the West Indies, the plantain is a symbol of Caribbean culture, invoking both a unique sweetness and the bitter exploitation involved in harvesting it for export. The term "mancha de plátano" ("the stain of the plantain,"

referring to the fruit's besmirching sap) is used in colloquial Puerto Rican Spanish as an idiom of local Creole roots. In all of his work, Luciano helps us question how we assign value to things – why are yams worth more than freedom and burgers more than life? So, too with the *Plantainum* works where the plantain is equated with precious metal: it is covered in platinum, rotting under a pristine and seductive shell.

The plantain's shape invokes the phallus as well. Luciano plays on this double entendre to invoke Puerto Rican masculinity. To be colonized is to be put in a position of subjugation and dependency, long associated in patriarchal culture with femininity. Rather than submit, Luciano suggests the colonized man reclaim his masculine pride by rejecting the association of his culture with weakness, and to see it rather, as virile and fecund. It's a way of re-appropriating the stereotype and linking it to similar and pervasive re-empowerment movements such as American hip-hop culture.

Another cultural rejuvenation comes via Japan. Luciano takes a typical anime superhero character and endows him with plantain power. Disney, the entertainment industry's equivalent of McDonald's, has been appropriated by Japanese "anime," wherein some superheroes turn from dark-haired to blond as they gain power. In the *Manga-Mancha* series, Luciano has turned hair, the symbol of both beauty and superficial racial differences, into plantains. He has created a new Samson for today's children to admire in his drawings and in a relief panel painting ready to burst off of the wall and into our shopping cart.

Luciano invokes consumer culture in an effort to make us aware of how it is connected to our lives, our cultural identities. In our age of globalization, colonialism operates via corporations, and urban sprawl has reached the islands. Ours is, in fact, an age of neo-colonialism, one that shackles through consumer enticement.

The writer, **Chen Tamir**, is an Israeli-Canadian curator and art critic. She is currently a graduate candidate at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. She holds a B.F.A. in visual art and a B.A. in anthropology. Tamir is a member of Flux Factory, an art collective in Queens. She is based in Toronto, Tel-Aviv, and New York. The mentor was **Nancy Princenthal**. Princenthal is a Senior Editor at Art in America and has written extensively for many other publications, including The New York Times, Artext, ArtUS, The Village Voice, Bookforum, and Parkett. The monographs and catalogs she has recently contributed to include Robert Mangold and Doris Salcedo (both Phaidon) and Alfredo Jaar: *The Fire This Time* (Charta); *After the Revolution*, a survey of recent art by women for which she is a co-author, is in press (Prestel). Princenthal was a lecturer in the Visual Arts Program at Princeton University from 1993-2004 and has taught and lectured widely.