

ROXANA PÉREZ-MÉNDEZ

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts | Pittsburgh

Most writers translate “Este Es Mi Pais,” the title of Roxana Pérez-Méndez’s exhibition in the Morris Gallery, as “This is My Homeland,” instead of “This is My Country.” Pérez-Méndez may have grown up on a Caribbean island most Americans consider another country, but Puerto Ricans are issued U.S. passports, lending this exhibition a far broader scope than yet another self-portrait of a performative Latina, framed through the lens of her homeland’s exotic flora and fauna. However far away her homeland seems, it remains our country. Kate Smith’s bold, patriotic rendition of “This is My Country” hardly evokes images of colorful parrots, but Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is My Land, This Land is Your Land” does. “Este Es Mi Pais” explores aspects of our country obscured by misinformation, which Pérez-Méndez exploits in ways that identify rather than discredit our outlandish ideas regarding her “homeland.” While Shirin Neshat channels cultural distance to gain widespread sympathy, Pérez-Méndez’s compass points to “home” in a sea of mainland bias.

Pérez-Méndez selected six paintings from PAFA’s collection that capture the ocean’s allure, Puerto Rican figures, or the PR patron saint of Puerto Rico, San Juan Bautista. Using the technique known as Pepper’s ghost, she augmented scenes from two PAFA paintings, further distorting historic events. By projecting video onto one-way mirror glass, she superimposes her imagery onto a painting’s surface or some three-dimensional field, such as a terrarium. With *Ana* (all work 2010), a camera broadcasts a live video feed of a caged parakeet, making it look as though the subject of James Peale’s portrait of Anna Maria

Hodkinson is grasping a birdcage. In *Selva*, Pérez-Méndez, who often performs in her videos, plays a demure Indian woman inhabiting some unspoiled tropical jungle, contained inside a large-scale terrarium filled with live plants. In *Boricua* (the name given to Puerto Rican inhabitants), she dances the individually choreographed parts of about a dozen dancers, sporting variations of the same outfit projected onto a free-standing jungle backdrop.

Pérez-Méndez’s work incidentally explores how depictions of exotic women have lured men to undertake feats of bravery, as they “go for” the American dream or colonize alien lands in hopes of acquiring sufficient wealth to secure their wives or hook up with indigenous fem-aliens. Only a century ago, Gauguin’s Tahitians, Matisse’s Moroccans or Renoir’s Turkish dancers inspired otherworldly male fantasies. For nearly six decades, Latina movers and shakers—Carmen Miranda, Rita Moreno, Chita Rivera, Charo, Gloria Estefan, Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera, Shakira—have captured our attention, though these gals tend to incite contentment rather than command moral courage. For *Canción Para Ana* Pérez-Méndez becomes a Copacabana-era fan dancer in her own right, offering a double “burlesque” of sorts, while satirizing Latina stereotypes. Pérez-Méndez seems most “at home” in *Bautizo*, a video that captures her relaxing under a waterfall, whose soothing cascade of water suggests resolve, if not redemption/liberation. Not only does Pérez-Méndez’s achievement of high-tech ends by low-tech means inspire endless fascination, but so does her desire to deride rather than contest absurd stereotypes as well.

~Sue Spaid



ROXANA PÉREZ-MÉNDEZ (LEFT TO RIGHT), *SELVA*, 2010, PEPPER'S GHOST HOLOGRAM, DV & COMPONENTS, MIXED MEDIA TERRARIUM, WATER PUMP, PLEXI, WOOD. PHOTO MATT SUIB. *BAUTIZO*, 2010, DV PERFORMANCE & COMPONENTS. PRODUCTION STILL E. WYLLIE. COURTESY THE ARTIST.