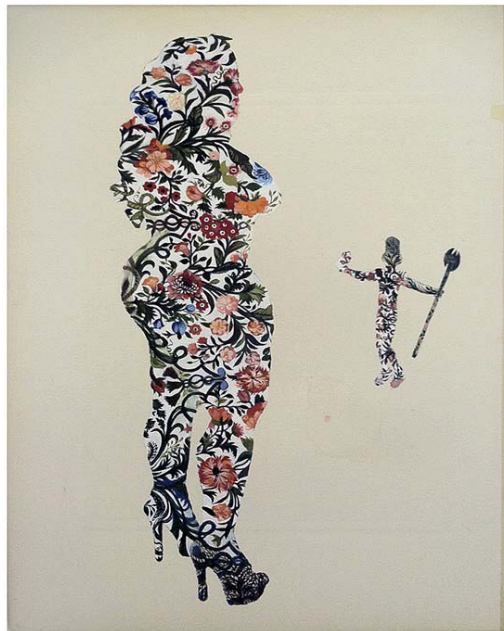


Firelei Baez's Stunning PAMM Exhibit, "Bloodlines", Dissects Complex Racial Identities

By Stassa Edwards, December 1, 2015



Detail of *Man Without a Country*, by Firelei Báez

Firelei Báez's whole identity is a political tug-of-war.

Born to a Dominican mother and a father of Haitian descent, the 34-year-old artist and self-described "Caribbean hybrid" was raised in Dajabón, a market city on the Dominican Republic's border with Haiti. As a child, Báez recalls seeing the landscapes of both countries from her home, with views of Haiti's dying, deforested landscape standing in stark contrast to the verdant valleys and mountains of the Dominican Republic. Dividing the two countries is the Dajabón River, the site of the 1937 massacre of thousands of Haitians at the hands of Dominican President Rafael Trujillo's brutal regime.

That landscape, which has long been a vivid symbol of the violent history between the two countries — which are again locked in a humanitarian crisis over Dominican attempts to deport thousands of Haitians — haunts Báez's work.

"Politics came in naturally," she says of her art.

That marriage of political and personal is on view in "**Bloodlines**," a solo exhibition that anchors the Miami Art Week showcase at Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), which also features a retrospective of Jamaican-born artist Nari Ward. "Bloodlines" is a small show, taking up only one large gallery of the bayfront museum, but Báez's

work is rich and challenging. PAMM's exhibition, which ranges from color-splashed, large-scale paintings to sculptures and multimedia pieces, highlights her diverse talents.

The work explores her sense of being a hybrid, both culturally and racially. As Báez puts it, the pieces explore the "slippery in-between space of binary-defying identities." That in-betweenness, a sense of never fully identifying or being identified with one particular group, is a constant in her art.

That's why she's a perfect fit for PAMM, which tries to exhibit art that reflects Miami's diverse community but also engages in an international conversation. PAMM wants to explore how "context can inform generating new knowledge in terms of the contemporary cultural experience," says assistant curator María Elena Ortiz.

That sense of geography, and its relevance to Miami, is palpable in "Bloodlines."

That's because Báez understands South Florida. At the age of 10, she relocated with her family to Miami. The move had a profound impact on her. In the Dominican Republic, Báez says, racial identity was much more complicated. But in the United States, those shades of gray were suddenly gone.

"There's a fluidity of color, of race, in the Caribbean," she says. "In America, you're black."

That didn't make race less fraught. Rather, it added another layer of "otherness" to Báez's understanding of herself. "As someone born in the DR but raised mostly in the United States, I am constantly navigating ways of articulating something that is familiar but also very distant," she says.

As Báez prepared for her show at PAMM, she wanted to remind herself of that distance and its emotional poignancy. She had left Miami to attend Cooper Union in New York, where she earned a BFA in 2004 and stayed to set up her studio. But she felt like she needed to return to Miami to complete the work, so she packed up her East Harlem studio and moved to the Magic City for a year to work on many of the objects in "Bloodlines."

"[The] exhibition feels like an emotionally resonant homecoming," Báez says. And the narrative threads she created will be familiar to Miamians.

That tension between race and identity is clear in *Can I Pass? Introducing the Brown Paper Bag to the Fan Test for the Month of June* (2011), an installation of multiple self-portraits Báez made every day for a month. The portraits, which are part of a series she worked on daily from 2011 to 2013 as a "warmup in the studio," explore the arbitrariness of skin color. Every morning, Báez would mix a paint sample based on the color of her forearm.

The final products — small paintings in which the artist's face shifts between abstraction and realism — are rendered in that fleshy skin tone. Her facial features are abstracted, yet her eyes, which look defiantly at the viewer, are depicted in exquisite detail.

The title hints at deeply embedded definitions of race. The brown paper bag test was a real exercise used throughout the United States in the 19th Century: A brown paper bag would be held next to a person's skin to determine whether he or she was white.

"It's a test that stopped a lot of personal progress, like marriage and education," Báez says. And, she points out, it's "still effective today."

"Look at Beyoncé or President Obama," she says. "They fall within that acceptable quota of whiteness. It's painful to see."

History is always just beneath the surface of Báez's art. Nearly all of the works in "Bloodlines" include historical ideas about race and gender still slyly at work today, rendered with nods to visual aesthetics of the past.

In one large-scale painting of a woman depicted in bright hues — *Sans-Souci (This Threshold Between a Dematerialized and a Historicized Body)* (2015) — the woman's face is both abstract and representational, as in Báez's self-portraits. The woman's eyes are penetrating and defiant. Yet her hair is covered by an elaborate and intricately painted headdress.

Báez explains that when New Orleans was under Spanish rule, free Creole women were required to wear the headdresses to cover their hair so it wouldn't "seduce" white men. The rule was meant to be punitive, a kind of

scarlet letter used to mark them. The women, however, refused to be cowed. Instead of donning plain headdresses, the Creoles wore stunningly colorful creations that became what Báez calls "subversive beauty."

Her rendering is as elegant as the headdresses themselves. It looks like antique fabric covered with complex patterns. But those patterns, which appear in works throughout the exhibition, are Báez's own design. From afar, they appear as paint-rendered fabric, a nod to the Old Masters. Up close, however, it's clear the print is made from objects associated with race: raised fists, hair picks, and chains. "I use the headdress as a point of projection, where I can use all of these symbols," she says.

Those symbols and concerns carry through to *Man Without a Country (AKA Anthropophagist Wading in the Artibonite River)* (2014-'15), a wall-size installation consisting of pages from old books and maps that Báez has altered and defaced. The pages are mostly taken from books from libraries throughout New York City.

"It's like a conceptual cleanup," she says of her process. "It's like what histories they are willing to acknowledge and which ones they want to disassociate from."

Báez delves into that history by adding the outlined bodies of women "doing things outside of the norm of what's feminine or acceptable." She found the images on YouTube and added the bodies, largely of women of color, by inserting them into histories from which they had been erased. On one page, Báez has altered a print of James Booth, a 19th-century American chemist, by adding brightly colored flames emerging from his head. In other pages, Victorian men of science and industry have pop-like neon-colored circles painted on their faces. Báez says those circles represent a "failed seeing-eye test" indicating "the ones who failed and the ones who succeeded."

On another page, a geological map of Indiana emerges from between two disembodied legs made from an elegant floral pattern. The image suggests the ties between labor and ownership. Báez goes a step farther, suggesting that abstraction can easily turn real by fading the disembodied legs into a photograph of real feet. In a separate image, two women pose in stereotypically sexy positions while ropes emerge from between their legs to attach their bodies together. Their flesh is reduced to veins and arteries.

Man Without a Country is not about individuals, Báez says. Rather, like all of the works in "Bloodlines," it's about how those arbitrary racial and cultural identities are written on the bodies of women of color.

"An individual is a repository of all of these histories," she says. "Like the title of the exhibition says, the body is about all of these bloodlines.

"The only resistance," she adds, "is to be illogical."