

“If These Walls Could Speak: Nuestras Identidades in and on the Streets”

Community murals designed and directed by Nuyorican artist María Domínguez are spaces of *puertorriqueñidad*. She creates art that helps us celebrate as we learn about ourselves and our culture.

Domínguez began her artistic career as a muralist with Cityarts in New York City in 1982. For the past twenty-eight years she has dedicated a great part of her artistic work to public art. To date, she has created twenty-two community murals.

Each mural that Domínguez helps to create resonates with the community. Her goal is for the art to make an impact, that they be works of art for the members of the community where they are created and that they engage and maintain a dialogue with that community. María defines herself as a visual narrator and art educator. She helps people who do not think they are artists to imagine, create, and communicate their stories in a visual language.

Baile Bomba

María created her first work of public art in 1983 for the housing advocates Pubelo Nuevo: two fifteen by twenty-five feet murals titled *Baile Bomba (Dance Bomba*, Lower East Side, 1983). Her goal was to communicate the Puerto Rican community’s resistance against the Gentry Art that was invading the Lower East Side, or Loisaida, in search of cheap housing. The theme of *bomba* sings out the artist’s message: “*Bomba!*... a dance of spiritual renewal, *Bomba!*... introduced by African slaves, *Bomba!*... a dance of the people, *Bomba!*... the people want to dance *Bomba!*”

On the first wall a smiling dancer, dressed in a traditional afro-Puerto Rican *bomba* outfit, floats on a Caribbean blue background. Her dress fans out about her, creating the shape of the island of Puerto Rico. She is poised to twirl to the rhythm of the loud and clear voices of the community that screams, in unison, their desire to preserve their neighborhood and space. Cupped in the open hand of her outstretched arm is a *flamboyán*. She offers us the flower as a symbol of hope for a new space / *un pueblo nuevo*.

On the second wall the *bomba* dancer proudly lifts her full skirt and petticoats with two hands to allow us to see the Nuyorican neighborhood that she is protecting. She is custodian of a community full of light and promise. The dancer is the Loisaida community and she dances *bomba* to battle against the beating drums of gentrification, poverty, and drugs. The mural of this communal dance of resistance demands a healthy, safe space for the Puerto Rican community of Loisaida to grow and prosper.

El Pueblo Cantor

The mural *El Pueblo Cantor* (A Singing Town, Bronx, 1994) is a twenty by ninety foot artistic manifestation that captures the celebration of a song. The mural transports the spectator from a gritty, gray New York City street to a colorful voyage through the Caribbean Sea, the tropical rain forest *El Yunque*, a rural mountain town, and the celebration of a *bombazo* in Old San Juan. The mural draws the viewer in as he or she becomes a participant in sentiments of pride and celebration of Puerto Rican culture.

The incredibly realistic image of a *vejigante* –a carnival personality– dominates the mural. This figure is part of the patron saint celebration of Saint James in Loíza on the northeast coast of Puerto Rico. Its mask, made from a coconut shell, is painted in the traditional colors, yellow and red:

*El vejigante está pintaó
de amarillo y coloraó*

This *vejigante* is ready to leap off the wall and dance through the streets, playing pranks and hitting people with a *vejiga* full of water, celebrating life. Embodied in a mask, the *vejigante* in this mural represents the vibrant Nuyorican community. He or she has the freedom to question authority to the rhythm of *plena*.

Conclusion

El Pueblo Cantor and *Baile Bomba* capture the celebration of song and dance of Puerto Ricans in New York. Like the *vejigante*, the Puerto Ricans in New York, as well as in Cleveland and Lorain, are ready to jump off the wall and play active, vibrant roles in their communities.

Maquettes (small scaled paintings) and photos of these and other community murals designed and directed by Nuyorican artist María Domínguez will be on display at the Beth K. Stocker Gallery at Lorain County Community College from April 20th – May 2nd 2010. Gallery hours are Monday – Friday from 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and during many Stocker Arts Center events. Additional hours for classes and groups by appointment. Please call 440-366-4140

Raquel M. Ortiz Rodríguez. Ph.D.