

Cherishing Puerto Rican Memories Through NMPRAC's New Exhibition — “ARCHIVOS VIVOS”



By Alonso Vidal

Adrián Viajero Roman is an interdisciplinary artist based in New York and Puerto Rico who, through his art, showcases the cultural and historical context of the Puerto Rican community in Puerto Rico and in its diaspora.

“Archivos Vivos” is Roman’s newest exhibition hosted by the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture in Humboldt Park.

This immersive exhibition deals with Puerto Rican identity, migration, and resilience through archival materials such as photographs, documents, and objects found during Roman’s trips through Puerto Rico.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

How do you want the audience to experience this exhibition?

This work, which spans over 105 years, connects to the human experience of where home is and what home looks like.

For me, it is really important to create an experience in my work—how I could share my stories or share how I want to interpret and articulate them.

Some of them are very intimate, and some are just ideas: the evolution of understanding, of being new every day, of learning and growing, but carrying that pride of who you are and your identity.

How can Puerto Ricans who grew up in the diaspora experience this exhibition?

I didn’t grow up in Puerto Rico; I grew up in New York, so I understand the disconnect between the yearning for home. I believe that many of our folks who grew up in the diaspora feel this way.

There’s a void in our lives that tugs at our souls, tugging at us to say that where you are doesn’t necessarily mean where you belong. Many of us don’t know how to respond to that feeling.

How have your personal experiences helped you create this exhibition?

One of the things that has helped me with my work is the lack of relationships that I had with my grandparents growing up. They were either in Puerto Rico or lived in different parts of the U.S.

It was a void.

I think I sought out that relationship through other elders that I met, whether from distant family or in the community. I would connect to [them]; it was a way for me to learn.

For me, it was more to understand the responsibility that I have to preserve these stories, the responsibility that I have to pass that down to my children—to know who we are, who you are as an individual, but also through your culture.

What was the process of recollecting these pieces?

I’ve collected a lot of the artifacts from my travels throughout the island while bringing aid to folks—picking things from their trash, picking things from the side of the road, from homes that got destroyed.

I also had intimate moments with people who shared some objects. I explained to them what I was doing, why I was collecting these things, and the importance of collecting these artifacts.

A lot of the very personal work, like with Constanza, I sat with her, I interviewed her, and we had a conversation. It was a beautiful experience.

There is a section dedicated to Hurricane Maria.

How important is it for the exhibition?

I was kind of catapulted into becoming an activist and an organizer during Hurricane Maria.

Going to Puerto Rico and being fully immersed in doing relief work, visiting families, and going through communities that were completely destroyed—I don’t think I was prepared as an artist or just as someone who grew up in New York.

The first thing on my mind was to help and to do what I could, but then right under that was absorbing the energy and the trauma and the stress from everyone else into my own personal body.

I didn’t know what was being put inside of me until I was able to figure out how to release it.

It’s not telling a Hurricane Maria story but saying, this



is where I was, this is who I met, this is what I was given.

So a lot of the work that we’ll see for Hurricane Maria is a direct reflection of that—from my point of view, what I was experiencing and seeing, what others have lived through, how I articulate that.

How do you think exhibitions like this one impact the cultural identity on younger generations?

We want to be open, and we want to share our culture and allow our children to continue carrying this torch, carrying the pride of who we are, and educating who we are—from the good to the bad.

I believe when you walk the streets of Division Street

in Humboldt Park or at a barrio in New York or the Lower East Side, these communities that were once all Puerto Rican communities, preserving our identity in these places has always been a part of our history.

The following are pieces from the exhibition. These pieces are collective memories of what people have experienced.

Trophy

Las Piedras, Puerto Rico, there was a school there, and the entire gymnasium wall collapsed.

There were trophies and things all over. As I’m walking through this gym, I see names of children who won these trophies and medals — young kids, middle school, elementary school. These are pivotal moments of growing up — accomplishments and achievements.

Watching them thrown around and destroyed was like a symbol of defeat, a symbol of loss. I wanted to save them from that. I wanted to save these children’s memories and put them back on a pedestal and honor their victories.

Flag

This piece is dedicated to our freedom fighters in Puerto Rico. The flag in the bottle [represents the]

newspaper photos that were taken after the attack on the House of Representatives by Lolita and her crew [Puerto Rican Nationalist Party members who sought Puerto Rico’s independence from the United States.]

Everyone thinks Puerto Ricans are always waving that flag. They’re so proud of that flag. And it’s really because that’s a symbol of resistance, of showing that, at one time, we couldn’t do this. It was illegal to possess a Puerto Rican flag on the island and in the States. We don’t want to go back to a time when we have to suppress who we are.



Toy Dinosaur

This little dinosaur here is from Andar; his mom shared this story.

Andar lives in La Perla, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Hurricane Irma hit the island, and then Hurricane Maria hit a week later.

Andar took this dinosaur when Hurricane Irma was coming, and he placed it in front of the door of his home to protect himself and his mom.

[When] Hurricane Irma passed, they went outside, but the dinosaur wasn’t there.

When Hurricane Maria hit, they were safe, no damage to them. Everyone was healthy and good.

They found the dinosaur across the street. Andar told his mom, that he believed the dinosaur protected them from Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria and returned home.

I asked if I could keep it or hold on to it and return it to him at some point.

Photos

These photos were given to me by an 83-year-old gentleman.

His home photos were destroyed by the ocean’s salt water flooding his home [after Hurricane Maria]. Memories of his family and special moments were washed away and turned into watercolor paintings.

For someone who’s 83 years old, this is how you remember things. Having a physical photo meant being able to pass it down to generations.

What Hurricane Maria did was erase our identities, memories, and history.

I wanted to save that and say although you can’t see who’s in this photo or what that photo was of at the time, the spirit of that memory and the spirit of the person is still present.