

Palm Readings

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BFA 2020, The Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp
A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN 2023 ©



Fig. 1. Maru Aponte, *Gringo on the hammock*, 2023, watercolour on paper, 4.5 inches x 3.5 inches

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Land Acknowledgment: Canada and Puerto Rico

I wish to acknowledge that I learn and paint in is situated on unceded, traditional and ancestral xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and sə́lilwə́taʔt (Tsleil-Waututh) territories.

I also wish to acknowledge that I grew up and began painting in Puerto Rico, what once was the land of the Taínos, the historic indigenous people of the Caribbean.

Finally, I acknowledge the people, the landscape, the sunsets, the waves, the more than human inhabitants of Puerto Rico including the flora and fauna, especially the coqui, the native frog of the island and the energy found on this land that I have the privilege to call home.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my parents, Adriana y Juan Carlos, who have made big sacrifices to support me in a practice that they understand little of. Thank you for your faith in me. To my brother Guillermo, who has always pushed me to want more, thank you for being you. To my grandmother Martha who I grew up with as an example of perseverance, and a woman who has always been unique and herself, thank you for igniting my creative passion. I would like to thank Randy Lee Cutler, who has been a constant support in the MFA program and in writing this paper. I want to thank Marion, Gwentyth, and Jimena who have been exemplary women during my time in Vancouver and in the program. To Andres, thank you for sharing your light. To Georgia O'Keeffe, thank you for making your watercolours in 1916-1918. Finally I would like to thank my mentor Elizabeth McIntosh. Thank you for believing, adding, questioning, and engaging with my practice with so much passion and enthusiasm. To all the people who have been supporting me and believing that I could do this, you were right.

Introduction: *Palm Readings*



Fig. 2, Maru Aponte, *Amores en Piñones*, 2022, watercolour on paper, 4.3 inches x 5.5 inches

"Reciban de mí siempre mucha paz, pero sobre todo, mucho, mucho, mucho amor."

-Walter Mercado

"Always receive a lot of peace from me, but above all, a lot, a lot, a lot of love."

-Walter Mercado

Have you ever thought that writing about something that doesn't exist is like telling the fortune of an art piece? Back In the Caribbean, I was always reading palm trees, their shape, their silhouette, lines, colours, movement and actions. Now In Canada I am writing about paintings that I have started but not yet finished. It's like I am also reading palms here, the palms of my hand in action. I am reading the traces, actions, lines, marks and decisions my hands have already made to tell the fortune of a painting that doesn't yet exist. Each brushstroke, each gesture is recorded, and it gives certain information, leaving one thinking about the future of painting. In this way, being a "palm reader" is how I make observations, and perhaps even predictions.

Chapter 1: Research Questions and Artistic Method

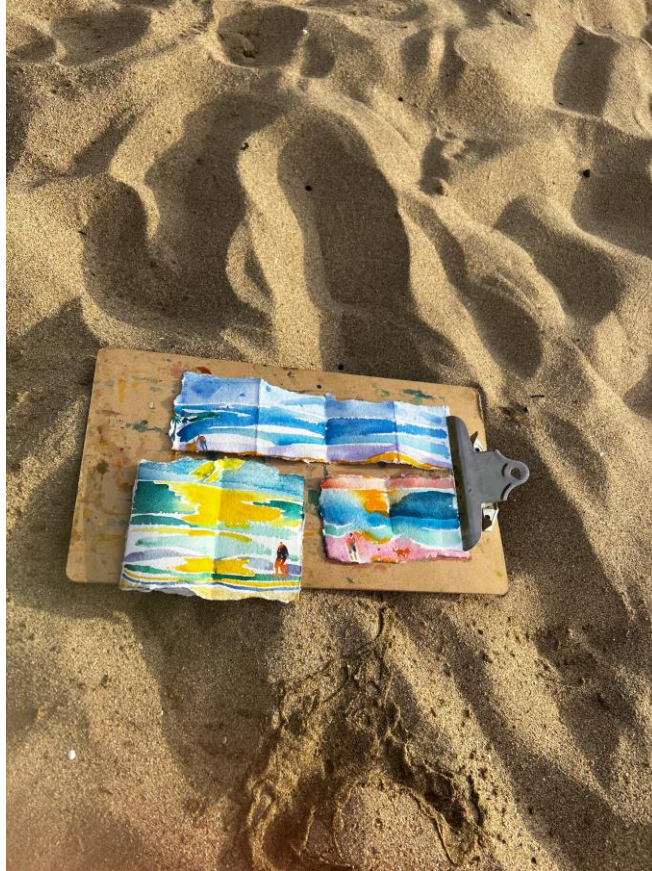


Fig. 3, Maru Aponte, Beach in Puerto Rico, 2022

This thesis document titled *Palm Readings* is informed by entangled topics that take up plein air painting, watercolour as a primary medium and the relationship of colour to the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. The specific questions that I address in the work are:

How can plein air painting in the Caribbean function as a form of deep acknowledgement of place?

What is the potential of watercolour as a contemporary artistic medium?

How can colour represent the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico and its culture?

Each chapter of this thesis addresses these questions and is anchored by different visual examples of my Thesis Project. It has taken me a while to solidify these questions. I think it is because I enjoy the looseness that watercolour and plein air painting afford and have been resistant to fixing meaning. But I realize now that I can articulate these three questions without losing the fluidity, abstraction and flexibility of the Thesis Project.

I feel like every time I paint, I am asking a question through materials and my artistic method. In this sense I wonder if watercolour is both a noun and a verb. Working with this medium is slippery. It is often dismissed as; not serious, for amateurs, as studies for final paintings in a different medium or as a means to draw rather than paint. Historically, watercolour has been associated with the term 'Sunday Painters' which is associated with hobby painters, painters that paint in their spare time or are not academically trained. That's not me. I have had the opportunity to educate myself in painting at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, The Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp and now at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver. Despite or perhaps because of my educational experiences, watercolour is the medium I am most connected to. While developing my Thesis Project it became very important to demonstrate that the medium of watercolour has the capacity to stand on its own, that it is at the level of any other painting medium, that it can function on many surfaces and be a final work and most importantly, watercolour is a medium with the capacity to make innovative artworks in contemporary times. In my time in Vancouver I was introduced to Silke Otto Knapp's artwork. I was inspired by her work exclusively in watercolour at a large scale and the potential she demonstrates by incorporating interesting configurations.

Watercolour is an intriguing medium for how it represents and translates colour. It is direct, transparent, and doesn't hide physical gestures or mark making. It has a strong character and simultaneously is delicate. It provides the capacity to use saturated and pure pigments when you learn to use it, it has the ability to keep colours fresh and luminous, even from a distance. For me it possesses the brightness of stars in the sky when viewed from Earth .

My research questions are informed predominately by visual research, observation and thinking through doing. While I do integrate various citations in this text, I am inspired predominantly by the physicality of experiential learning. My research occurs in the action of painting and what comes up in the process. When I have questions, I look to other artists' practices and processes to see possibilities and how they might have addressed similar concerns that I encounter in my studio activities.

As a young woman growing up in Puerto Rico, I did not have the opportunity to be exposed to many women artists. It has therefore become important to search for inspiring women painters and learn from their experiences with this medium. I have been looking at Georgia O'keeffe,

Hele Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, Marlene Dumas, Vivian Suter, and finally I have been influenced by the guidance of my mentor, Elizabeth McIntosh.

In my MFA project I have been learning to unlearn. In “On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again and Letting Be”, Rachel Jones states, “Cultivating wonder is a way of remaining open to the otherness of the other without seeking to appropriate or assimilate them.” Drawing on her attention to wonder, I have been learning to follow materials and to embrace their mutable nature. I need to know the rules to then challenge them and find new ways of exploring a material’s potential. Being curious has become integral in my practice and so has letting go. I bring my curiosity to exploring each new painting that I make through material investigations. Letting go of what I expect the paintings to be has also opened avenues for embracing chance and what occurs within each painting. I never really know what the final outcome of each work will be, even when using my small plein air watercolours on paper pieces as a starting point. The material of watercolour never repeats itself, therefore making it impossible to remake or fully copy another painting.

Artistic Method

My artistic method evolves directly from my research questions. I am inspired not only by the history of plein air painting but what it might mean in this contemporary moment. Having spent so much of my formative years in the Caribbean, it is not surprising that I paint outdoors as much as I do. Learning about plein air painting once I left the island has given my practice a context both in terms of art history and Puerto Rico. Plein air painting has made me more aware of my homeland, its history, the climate, and the cultural atmosphere. Working with this method, I have become more aware of what and how I add to a particular location. In this way, I am responsive to what the landscape adds in my development as a person and as a painter.

In the past few years, before starting the MFA program, I spent more time away from the island than on it. Simultaneously, I have been using painting materials such as oil, acrylic, spray paint, ink and watercolour in their various liquid states. What I missed most about living on an island is the accessibility to the water. Working with different turquoises and blues has produced an elusive poetic transparency often found in close proximity to each other. Diluting the various mediums that I worked with became an opportunity for me to connect to the diverse qualities of water that I was used to interacting with everyday.

Working with multiple locations both inside and outside the Caribbean, I realize that my connection to the Puertorrican landscape informs everything that I paint. By this I mean that I have chosen to paint Puertorrican landscapes while living in Vancouver. The distance allows me to see the features of the island clearer and perhaps in a more heightened way.

My artistic method during the MFA program has been focused on watercolour allowing me to cultivate a degree of depth with this material. As Helen Frankenthaler commented, "The only rule is that there are no rules... The picture unfolds, leads, unravels as I push ahead."

Frankenthaler's practice is inspiring for her commitment to the liquidity of her materials, her experimentation with works on paper and lastly, her exploration of watercolor itself.

The liquid nature of watercolour is especially profound in my research. Watercolour pigment needs only water to be activated. There is a freedom in its liquid nature but also a loss of control. Letting go is a kind of freedom, and in a way how I collaborate with the medium. The material flows in the direction that it wants to go, making many decisions for me. I don't have control of how the pigments mix, combine, sit and dry. I can only predict and later react to what happened. In a way, I fool myself into thinking that I am not responsible for making all of the decisions that are involved in creating paintings.

This loss of control creates a kind of abstraction and demands that I am flexible, mentally and physically, with the process. This flexibility eventually becomes an instinct and is embodied in my gestures. The majority of my reactions need to unfold with agility because of the fast drying material. In the thesis project I have found different ways for my body to be integral with the process of painting watercolour and how it influences the image.

Finally, my artistic method is informed by colour both in relation to the kinds of colour available through the watercolour medium but also how it connects to my homeland. The intensity of colour has been part of my aesthetic sensibility since childhood. Growing up on the island and absorbing so much light from the sun, I have a tendency to only use saturated colours. Using saturated colour is the most honest way for me to make paintings that represent the Caribbean culture of Puerto Rico. Because of the complex identity found on the island, there is a diversity of cultural influences (Taino, Europe, Africa and the United States) as well as the intersection of different religions that contribute to what is Puerto Rico today. Because of migration from various places, the richness of different languages and multiple traditions and ceremonies, it feels necessary to reflect this complexity by using saturated colours. For me, the intensity of saturated colour comes to represent the intensity of the Puertorrican experience, beautiful, cacophonous and very honest.



Fig. 4, Maru Aponte, *Punta Borinquen*, 2022, watercolour on canvas, 5'5 ft x 5.8 ft

Chapter 2: Al aire libre, Plein Air Painting and Accordion Books



Fig. 5, Maru Aponte, *Indicators playa*, 2022, 16 inches x 4 inches

How can plein air painting in the Caribbean function as a form of deep acknowledgement of place?

There was a moment when I was doing my undergraduate degree that I wondered whether I had chosen to be a painter because someone had told me I was good or because I really wanted to be a painter. When I was introduced to painting plein air in my first year at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Belgium, I felt that I had found the answer to this question. I find the experience of painting outside reaffirms my connection to painting, to place and the powerful energies that it affords. I find harmony in being able to pair two things that I love and that ground me, painting and being outside breathing fresh air in the landscape. When I feel overwhelmed or stuck I like to go outside, breathe fresh air and remind myself of my inspiration.

Plein Air painting was pioneered by John Constable in 1813 in Britain and became very popular in the 1860s with the French Impressionists. This approach of being able to make paintings outside was facilitated by the technological innovation of painting tubes. Plein air painting offered something fresh and new to the long history of painting more generally. It also allowed artists to connect more deeply with their local context, the topography and the quality of atmospheric light. In this way, the origins of plein air painting allowed for a deep acknowledgement of place. Its popularity among artists and their viewers meant that the work produced outside wasn't just a sketch but a finished and complete work.

For plein air painting, it is important to utilize lightweight materials so that one can move around easily. I use watercaps as pigment holders, a metallic box because it is compact and

lightweight to carry in my bag. For the surface, I enjoy using cold-press handmade cotton paper. With my thesis project I have focused on this paper because it is very porous and I appreciate how the pigments are absorbed and sit on the rough surface. I consciously selected cotton paper because I associate it with cotton towels that are essential to have in Puerto Rico. I enjoy handmade paper because they are unique and have irregular textures. I enjoy it so much that I exaggerate it by selecting big sheets of paper and tearing the paper myself, allowing for the edges to be sincere, rough and imprecise. The tearing of the paper reveals its fleshy fibers and shows in an honest way, the liveliness of my process. As none of the torn paper ever results in the same tears, each sheath is unique. This ensures that each completed watercolour has its own original scale and format. A paper's individuality is integral to my decision making of what to paint.



Fig. 6, Maru Aponte, *Los salvavidas de Luquillo*, 2022, 16 inches x 6 inches

The accordion books that I made at the start of the MFA program deepened my connection to painting plein air. The small scale which made it portable allowed me to better understand my relationship to the landscape and the particularities of a place. I explored both horizontal and vertical orientations which encouraged me to view familiar vista from fresh perspectives. Working with small accordion books that are folded at intervals allow me to abstract the painting process and focus on sections rather than the vista in front of me.(fig. 6) Seeing my work abstractly has been an important part of my artistic method with these small works.

The accordion format continues to come in handy because of the practicality of folding the paper for greater portability. This allows me to carry as many papers as possible. In the process



of using the accordion book each individual square influences what I focused my observation on. Working with two to five successive squares. Each one functions as a view catcher of what is in front of me. Each square ensures that I concentrate on a small section of the larger image and work on specific aspects of the landscape. In this way I move between a singular square and the series of squares that make up the complete image. This way of viewing allows me to focus per section and in a way, think abstractly. To think abstractly opens up the possibilities of immersion for myself as the maker and the viewer. I have made more than 50 accordion pieces since the beginning of the program. At the same time, the small accordion format also functions as mini artist books. Each one offers an aesthetic encounter with watercolour on an intimate scale. When I look at a series of complete books it is one of the most exciting parts of the process.

In my first semester in Vancouver I did some plein air sessions in different areas of Vancouver. I was amazed by how the river water and the waterfalls at Lynn Canyon were vibrant phthalo green. I returned many times to capture the intense greens of the water. In this process I made many watercolour accordion books and noticed that the Pacific West Coast of British Columbia, specifically of the Lower Mainland had a different colour palette than Caribbean Antilles island of Puerto Rico. In addition to the incredible hues, I was also inspired by the monumentality of the geology. I was especially attracted to the Twinfalls Bridge waterfalls. I enjoyed the zig zag movement of the water as it fell to the ground. Doing the small accordion book for this site, I felt the need to scale up the work in order to fully capture the feeling that a force of water transmits. This scaling up in response to the site would later inform my Thesis Project which consists of large scale watercolours on canvas. I will pick up on this thread in the next section.

Fig .7, Maru Aponte, *Navidades en Luquillo*, 2022, watercolour on paper, 15 inches x 3 inches

Returning to my research question: How can plein air painting in the Caribbean function as a form of deep acknowledgement of place? Coming to Vancouver, I simultaneously learned about the Aboriginal Land Acknowledgment and this incredible land itself. Through plein air watercolour painting, I discovered a connection to this land and its complex history of habitation. I think that this sensitivity to the Land

Acknowledgment has made me more aware of my own homeland and how important it is for me to celebrate and honor Puerto Rico. In this way, I continue to be amazed with how this technique opens up the possibility for understanding where I am situated, the practice of painting in its many forms and how they are always entwined. In the same way that plein air painting during the Impressionist period connected artists to place, and rural settings, my own engagement with this form has allowed me to discover a deeper connection to and acknowledgment of Puerto Rico. The studio can be anywhere whether the watery settings in Puerto Rico or the lively forests of The Lower Mainland. The flexibility of water regardless of place is echoed in the flexibility of watercolour as a medium.

In Puerto Rico, our art history is traced back to the Taino aboriginals. They made art for religious and communication purposes. After the arrival of the Europeans, the Spaniards brought religious painting panels. There are very few recordings, documentation and preserved artworks since the island has always been exposed to massive hurricanes and earthquakes. On the island, I grew up knowing that natural disasters are part of the island life. This mentality and experience has informed my ability to be flexible to adjust to a given moment and accept the adjustment. Like my father says in Spanish, “hay que bregar con lo que traiga el barco”, “We need to work with what the boat brings.” Thanks to technological advances in painting and materials, plein air allows us to be able to paint under any conditions, and anywhere. Painting outdoors is accessible to anyone. For me painting outdoors has become an important way of acknowledging the power and history of a place.

I am moved by the fact that my research in Vancouver informs my relationship to my homeland. To be able to paint in situ, on site, away from the studio, has allowed me to be more connected to where I am painting. Even if I have a studio space, it is essential to be able to begin the painting process on a specific site. This process has made me more aware, when I return to the island. I have a different gaze, a different perspective, looking with fresh eyes. I now better appreciate the mundane and daily interactions back home but also the ocean vistas, the shape of the waves and the incredible vegetation.

Inhabiting a strange entanglement of nostalgia and diaspora. I see the action of plein painting as an opportunity to better understand my relationship to the island, its diverse cultures and my sense of home. Beginning a project outdoors, I get to experience the land with more complexity. I am acutely aware of the light, the colours, the vegetation, the people and endless shifts in weather patterns. Indeed, it is a different way to experience being present. In a way, I am deciding what I want to remember by what I choose to paint and with what colour. Colour allows me to access memory through my senses. I can remember and be transported to an experience with colour. By practicing active looking and painting on site, my visual memory is engaged and captures elements of the landscape that might be forgotten later.

While I am working, I respond to how the land interacts with my paintings through its specific location. I am inspired by the Swiss Guatemalan artist Vivian Suters painting practice. Her studio in Guatemala is open to the outdoors. Wild animals enter her space as do the seasonal mudslides. She also leaves work outside to allow the weather to complete or finish the image. Suter makes works *with*, not of, the landscape, she explains: "It's all around me, and I don't see much further; it is enclosed, but outside." (Suter) This way of being with the elements also informs how I embrace and am directly affected by the natural elements of a site. If I am painting at the beach and the wind picks up speed, the paper occasionally flies away while it is still in process. Often, the pigments combine with the sand. In fact, many of the final watercolours have additional components including sand, leaves and grass which add to the work. I enjoy this because it feels that I honestly capture the materiality of the land and the moment. In a way I am collaborating with the land and its particular weather patterns. I am welcoming an intimacy with place into the paintings. Daniel Birenbaum's writing on Suter sheds light on this way of working. Invoking Timothy Morton in his book *Being Ecological* (2018), Birenbaum quotes the philosopher: "We are beings symbiotically entangled with other beings". Birenbaum sees a connection between Suter's work and Morton's reflection on our entanglement. "You are breathing air . . . evolution is silently unfolding in the background. Somewhere, a bird is singing and clouds pass overhead. . . . You don't have to *be* ecological. Because you *are* ecological." (Birenbaum) I appreciate these sentiments for how the relationship of making landscape paintings seems to seamlessly integrate with the experience of being in the landscape.



Left side: Fig. 8 *Vacía Talega*, 2022, watercolour on paper, 10.5 ft x 2ft
Right side: Fig. 9 *Twinfalls*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 13.5 ft x 2 ft

Chapter 3: Watercolour and Infinity pool

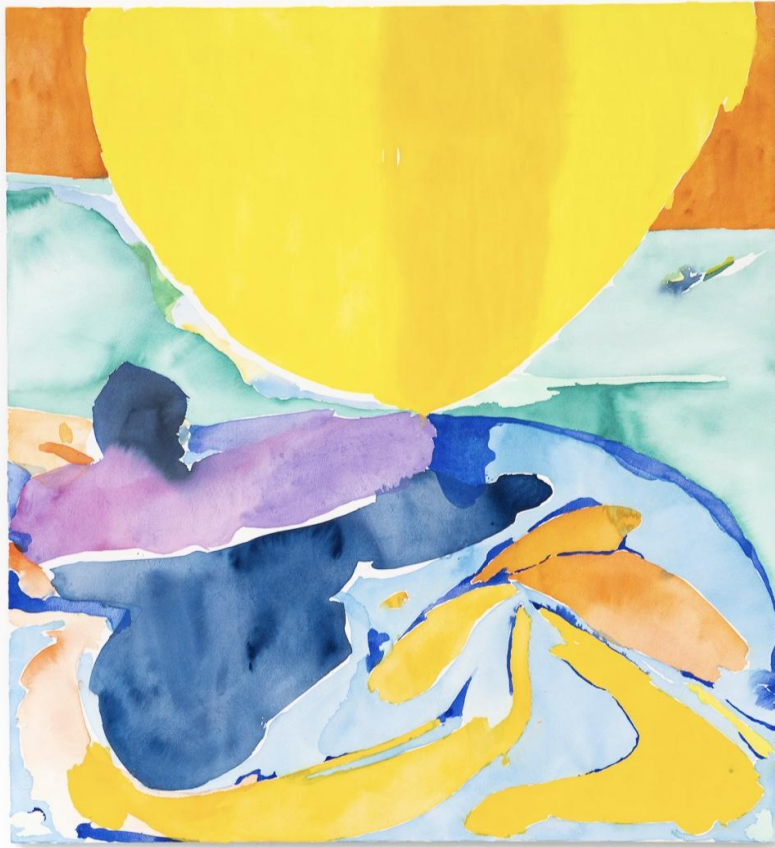


Fig.10, Maru Aponte, *El Infinito*, 2022, watercolour on canvas, 4ft x 4ft

When I was making oil paintings during my undergraduate degree in Belgium I decided to return to watercolour. This liquid medium possessed a kind of practicality for me. It is a material that allows for movement in making an image and capturing movement in the image. Watercolour has the capacity to be immediate without too much material or surface preparations. I can do many studies quickly with a loose hand. In Spanish, we describe this as, “calentar motores” in other words it heats up the engine, so to speak or loosens and stretches the muscles.

What used to be a medium for sketching has evolved to become my primary focus.. It allows for a rapid trial and error that promotes confident thinking because you cannot go back - there is not layering or editing in watercolour. The liquid aspect of watercolour continues to inform my understanding of abstraction. The material flows in the direction that it wants to go, it interacts with the colours that I introduce to the paper but it is a very independent medium. In this sense it has a lot of character, it can be saturated, bold, unexpected, ruthless, gentle and transparent at the same time. It is honest, it doesn't try to hide any spills or harsh marks. I believe that I have found a material that I can identify with deeply.

In the past, I used watercolours for many years as studies for my bigger acrylic or oil paintings on canvas. I saw them as studies even when I was secretly more connected to the work on paper. Watercolour painting came more naturally, I could let my guard down and not have high expectations, allowing for surprising results. There is a hierarchy of materials in the European system. You are a successful painter if you can make large format oil paintings on canvas. Looking at specific artists such as Henri Matisse, I learned that paintings were made with oil or acrylic paintings using watercolour studies as reference. This was an important realization. So I tried this method. After using creamy oil for many years I slowly started mixing media by bringing the different mediums to their most liquid state.

When I started the MFA program I consciously worked with water based spray paint, ink, acrylic, and watercolour on canvas, expanding on the fluidity that I found so inspiring working with just watercolour. From this process I learned the different characteristics of each medium and how they reacted with each other through layering each medium in different configurations rather than focusing on the image or final piece. Utilizing mix media created some interesting moments in terms of collage and juxtaposition of ideas, but I had a strong desire to ground the work in the more direct process of watercolour derived from the first hand observational plein air studies.



Fig. 12. Maru Aponte, *Infinity pool*, 2022, watercolour on canvas, 7ft x 6ft

Working with watercolour paper on a large scale was something that I wanted to do since the start of the MFA program. Because of the pandemic circumstances in 2021, I had to order the large format paper from another country. Working with large format paper has changed the way I interact with my painting practice. It is more physical. My entire body is engaged in making gestures and in the process - I cannot see the work until it is dry and I can stand it up; Because watercolour is a liquid medium I have to work flat and because of the scale I have to work on the floor. Making my thesis project work, I had some limitations with the studio space at Emily Carr University but I solved it by using the Grad Gallery as my studio space. This is similar to how American painter Laura Owens made her series *Twelve Paintings* in the gallery rather than in her studio. She comments that "painting in the studio has become very conservative..." (Interview). Similarly, I always adjust to the spaces that I work in. Instead of thinking that the studio is conventional, I understand the studio as being everywhere. Using bigger spaces outside of the studio has allowed the work to go larger. I am more flexible in scale and format and I can paint all at once instead of focusing on one area. Painting on the floor I

can walk around and on the paper. This method has provided another context for understanding the power of scale and how my work relates to the physical body. This is reminiscent of Laura Owens who states, "So if I am going to make a painting I am going to think about all the things painting does and exhaust them and slam new things into them...Something that painting does it can actually relate to your physical body." What has also felt important about working on large format watercolour paper is that I use big quantities of pigment. When you scale up an image, the identity of the colour shifts and transforms another persona.

As I continued to work, I reflected on why I am trying to make other painting mediums act like watercolour. Why can't they just be watercolour? In this way I came to work exclusively with this medium and on a large scale. In July 2022, I wanted to transfer this approach to working on canvas. With much research and determination, I found a way of preparing a canvas surface so that it has the handmade qualities of watercolour paper that I enjoy. This artistic research has brought me to the present moment working on large format watercolour paintings on canvas. This feels natural and authentic to what I love about painting - I can scale up and down allowing the medium of watercolor to shine. Previously I was locked in by the history of watercolour painting even though it is the very medium that inspires me to paint. I now honor the medium by embracing every aspect of it.

I have come to love the inevitable aspects of watercolour as well as those qualities where I have no control. It is a medium that celebrates the physical process of painting, leaving traces of the process that I don't want to hide anymore. I have come to appreciate the transparency about this process. My goal in painting isn't to make pretty paintings but rather transmit with honesty how I experience a place and the process of painting. Creating large format watercolour painting was a challenge that I took on for my thesis project. It is important for me to give my watercolors the honor they deserve in teaching me how to become more flexible, to listen and to be open to possibilities.



Fig. 13, Maru Aponte, *Sunset by the pool*, 2022, watercolour on paper ,14 inches x 4 inches

I understand watercolour as being similar to the architectural features of an infinity pool. An infinity pool has no apparent borders making you think that there is no separation between the water and surrounding landscape features. Its water appears to flow endlessly. I see this phenomenon as similar to my watercolour paintings. It is a medium that is never finished, at least in my eyes. It can always be reactivated with humidity or water; the climate is part of the paintings. In the time that I have been developing my thesis project I have been in endless and ongoing contact with water, as an activator of the medium, as a motif, and in my daily routines both in Vancouver and Puerto Rico.

At the moment in my thesis project I have made up 12 paintings on canvas using watercolour as a medium and water as a motif. There is something about the infinity of the ocean and not seeing beyond the horizon that makes one feel small. Large format paintings can provoke the same feeling. When you look at large format paintings from afar they feel small but the closer you get to the picture plane, the smaller you become. This reminds me of how when swimming in the open sea, I become just a small particle of water. Water is so important in my practice that I felt the need to increase the canvas size to allow for more surface so as to further represent the weight and importance of this element. Painting water with water is my little inside joke.

Reflecting on my process, "Infinity Pool" feels like an anchor to many of my realizations. This painting began by studying one of my plein air sessions in the north west municipality of Aguadilla, Puerto Rico (fig. x). In the past three years I have been visiting and being connected to this area because my brother Guillermo lives there. My relationship to this side of the island has grown deeper and stronger because of my brother and how he has shared his experience of the land with me. Being a surfer and loving the ocean, Guillermo has shown me areas that only locals go to including a magical infinity pool. I was amazed by the view and how the architecture made me feel as if I was part of the landscape.

Chapter 4: Calor y Color (Heat and Colour)



Fig. 14, Maru Aponte, *El Mix*, 2022, watercolour on canvas, 5.5 ft x 5.8ft

How can colour represent the island of Puerto Rico and its culture?

In my artistic practice I use colour to represent my experience growing up on the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. In this chapter *Calor y Color* (Heat and Colour), I will demonstrate how colour represents the energy of the island of Puerto Rico, the local people, the contemporary landscape and lifestyle. Colour functions as a sense activator that makes me engaged, curious and eager to create. I am passionate about how colour has the capacity to capture the energy

and sense of a place, a person and life. As seen in the painting *El Mix*, (fig,X) the palm tree functions as a sign of the tropics. I use colours to reinforce the signs that represent Caribbean culture from an insider perspective even though I am not currently living on the island. In my paintings, colour has the power to change the temperature of a space and the location where it is situated. For example, I see them quite differently in Vancouver than I would in Puerto Rico. While making an image, I aim to transmit my Caribbean energy into a painting by producing colour combinations that are bold and provocative. Colour is why I paint and show up everyday to my studio. Georgia O' Keeffe once said, "I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way - things I had no words for." This is similar to my own experience where I see colour as the vocabulary that is fundamental to my painting language. Writing this paper is much harder than doing paintings . I can communicate more accurately with colour and shape how I see, feel, and think. I believe my first language is painting, then Spanish with English as my third language.

The reason that I make paintings is to play with colour. As Albers says in *Interaction of Color*, I too like to "reverse the academic order by putting practice before theory, which, after all, is the conclusion of practice" (Albers 1). The interplay between colours is one of the main inspirations for my creative practice. Growing up with so much sunlight, everything in my surroundings was very bright. My island birth place has contributed to my sensitivity towards saturated colour. My experience in Puerto Rico, with its complex and colourful culture, is a vibrant, saturated, chaotic place. I consciously use saturated pigments that coexist on the same surface to create rhythm and harmony, especially harmony within chaos. In chemistry, saturation is the degree or extent to which something is dissolved or absorbed to the maximum possible. Saturation for me is the most intense form of colour pigmentation that can be found and I use it to represent and evoke the intense energy found in the people and lifestyle of my homeland.



Fig. 15, Maru Aponte, *Pressure Point*, 2022, watercolour on canvas, 3.3 ft x 3 ft

During the thesis project I have been observing the different colours that I bring into play in my paintings. I see the colour phthalo blue character or subject of my work in the form of watercolour. When I was exploring with mix media, I struggled to find the same harmony of blues that I had discovered with acrylic and spray paint. It became visually apparent that even if the painting tubes were composed of the same pigment, the state in which they coexist makes them different. The same colour often has multiple readings and personalities in the same painting. A similar experience occurs when painting with watercolour. One of the qualities I have observed about using colour with watercolour format is that the same colour never has the same consistency, this allows for the transparencies to make the same pigment be different colours.



Fig. 16, Maru Aponte, Details of : *Caribbean Gaze*, 2022, mix media on canvas

I grew up with normal weather being 90 degrees to 100 degrees (32-37 celsius). Sweat is common in Puerto Rico, so painting with warm colours kind of feels like sweating. My colour decisions represent the warm and humid weather found in Puerto Rico. Colour has the capacity to change the climate and provoke heat in painting. *Calor y color* means in english heat and color. I use this term to describe what I like to provoke with colour especially in my large format works on canvas. From the outside, the paintings do function as warm light sources. With the

intense colour and large scale, the paintings function almost like sunlight lamps for seasonal depression.

In the last ten years, the Caribbean has been getting hotter. I use warm colours as a way of addressing and pointing out this increase in temperature. The heat stress has affected livestock, coral reefs, labour productivity and human health. The all year warm weather attracts many tourists and visitors to the Caribbean, but it is important to bring awareness to how the climate crisis is affecting this region. In my most recent paintings, I have been working with colour as a means of addressing this phenomena. I am still exploring whether this operates as a warning that can communicate how the rising heat is affecting people and the landscape. I have been thinking about using saturated colours similar to how many small frogs have saturated colour. The brighter and more saturated their colour, the more poisonous they are. In this way, colour can be a warning sign of danger ...and death. The hotter the summer gets, the stronger the hurricanes will become. I have made plein air paintings on the island of places that used to exist. With the endless hurricane in Puerto Rico, many of these sites have disappeared.

Conclusion

Working on the thesis project has helped me question actions and decisions in my artistic practice. It has made it possible to ground the important role watercolour has to the process, the final paintings, and how I understand creative research. During the MFA program, I developed my investment in this medium by showing diverse ways it can be rethought in contemporary times.

I have paid more attention to my colour choices and found potential in how saturated colour can be a metaphor to reflect my Caribbean culture. In addition, the use of warm colours function to change the climate of a space by bringing awareness to contemporary climate crisis concerns found on the island of Puerto Rico. I have become very conscious of how scale and colour collaborate to draw attention to the paintings and simultaneously allow for a slower impact on the viewer. I intend to continue working on large scale paintings and engaging even further with the landscape format. I want to address the gaps and missing perspectives that have informed my experience as a female painter from Puerto Rico. While conducting research on my Thesis project, it came to my attention that there is very little exposure of woman painters doing plein air painting in the Caribbean. This thesis project has deeply informed how important it is for me as a woman painter from the Caribbean, to paint outdoors.

I see this Thesis Project *Palm Readings* as a good base to continue developing my connection to watercolour, water itself as a medium and water as subject matter. As a “palm reader,” I will continue using observations of natural landscapes and expand this way of looking to consider other genres such as still life, the figure, etc. I appreciate that watercolour has further potential and will continue exploring this by making more artwork to show the future of this medium. I am excited to continue manifesting my creative energies and importantly, sharing and passing the knowledge I have learned working on *Palm Readings* over the past two years.



Fig17, Maru Aponte, *Andres en playa sun bay*, 2023, Watercolour canvas, 4.5 ft x 3.75 ft

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Reflections after the thesis show

For my thesis exhibition, I presented four watercolour paintings on canvas. These paintings have different scales and formats. I deliberately explored the landscape format, which was new to me. I wanted to explore the long history of the triptychs in painting and rethink the possibilities of the triptych in today's world. Henri Matisse's "*Moroccan Triptych*", painted

during his visit to Tangier in 1912-1913, inspired my version of the triptych, which I called "*Puerto Rican Triptych*." In the process, I discovered that my Puerto Rican Triptych consisted not of three paintings, but of four. I saw the need to take action myself and rethink the purpose of the triptych. '*Verde tahiti*' deals with the interior of the island in the south of the island, '*Andres en Playa Sunbay*' with a contemporary Puerto Rican man taking a nap on the beach, '*Indicators*' looks from the inside out at my brother and his friends surfing in Rincon. '*Palm reading*' represents the saturated light of the island and my close observation palm trees.

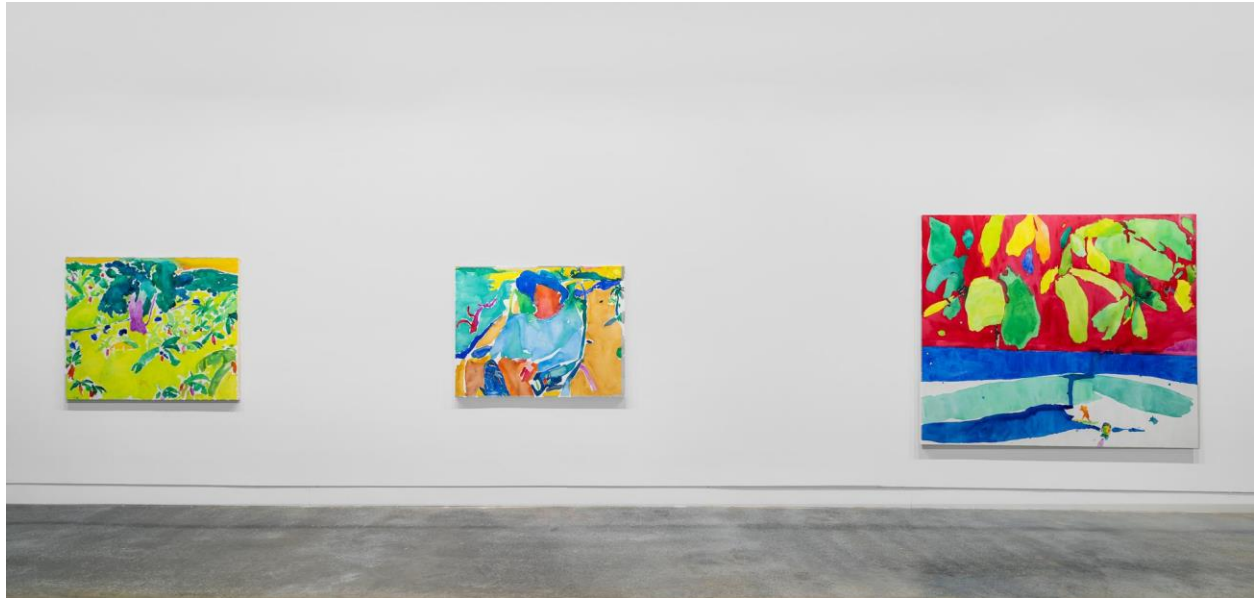


Fig from left to right

Fig.18, Maru Aponte, *Verde Tahiti*, 54 x 45 inches, watercolour on canvas, 2023

Fig 19, Maru Aponte, *Andres en Playa Sun bay*, 54 x 42 inches, watercolour on canvas, 2023

Fig 20, Maru Aponte, *Indicators*, 7 ft x 6 ft, watercolour on canvas, 2023



Fig.18, Maru Aponte, *Verde Tahiti*, 54 x 45 inches, watercolour on canvas, 2023



Fig 19, Maru Aponte, *Andres en Playa Sun bay*, 54 x 42 inches, watercolour on canvas, 2023



Fig 20, Maru Aponte, *Indicators*, 7 ft x 6 ft, watercolour on canvas, 2023

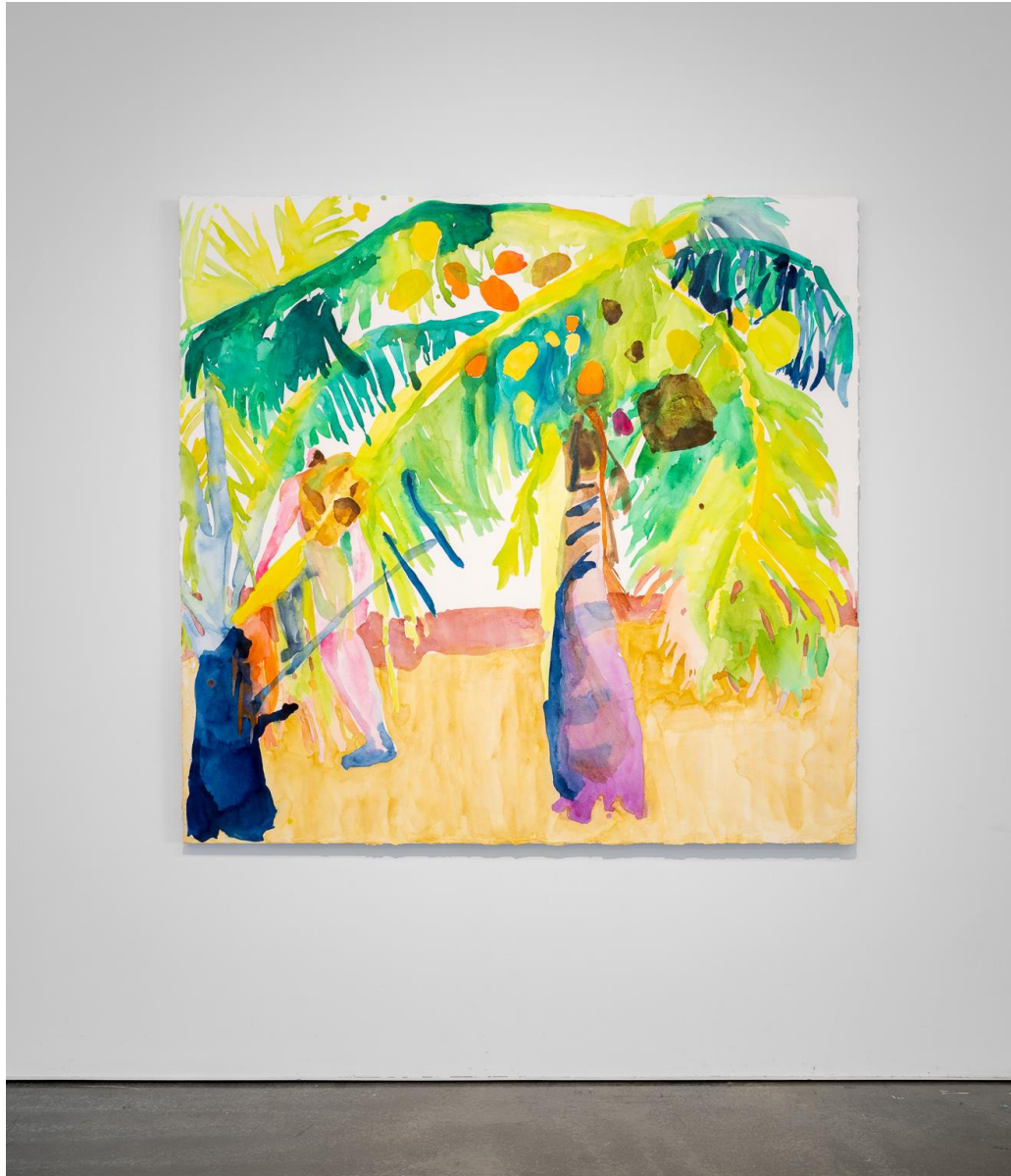


Fig. 21, Maru Aponte, *Palm Reading*, 5.5 ft x 5.8ft, watercolour on canvas, 2023