

A conversation between Nicolás Dumit Estévez and Coco López

NDE: Coco, can you discuss the relationship between the concept of your residency at El Museo del Barrio, that of a reinterpretation or re-reading of the work of Frederick Douglass *Pictures and Progress* by a group of your peers, and that of the place where your father lived, the Frederick Douglass Houses in Manhattan?

CL: Frederick Douglass Houses is situated in the Manhattan Valley neighborhood of Manhattan. When my father passed away late last year it became a site that drew me in further. During my residency I passed along Frederick Douglass's speech *Pictures and Progress* to friends and artists that live in the Uptown area. In this way the concept of Frederick Douglass as a person was also solidified as a place. There are a few statues of him on the Upper West Side, an avenue named after him, and numerous buildings with his name.

NDE: Did you live in the Frederick Douglass Houses? I recall passing them, as I often traveled from the subway station on Park Avenue to my place on West End Avenue. As far I can tell, up to the late 1990s, Amsterdam Avenue divided that area of Manhattan in two sections, two worlds and two realities.

CL: My father's side of the family lived there when they first moved to the U.S. from Cuba. I spent a lot of time there as a child and now only live a bit further north in Morningside Heights.

NDE: Who are those you have invited to read *Pictures and Progress* and what was your selection process at the moment of identifying your collaborators?

CL: I shared it with various people that live between Harlem and Washington Heights. I even gave some copies to visitors that stopped by my studio while I was there. There was no clean cut selection process and there was a mix of poets and artists who I spoke with about the project. Isla York, one of the collectives I spoke with, organized a program at El Museo related to our conversations together.

NDE: One of Frederick Douglass's most poignant points for me is his realization as a child (as related in *My Bondage my Freedom*) that he was enslaved, that he was someone else's property, and that he was at the mercy of a self-appointed master and lord. As an artist, what is your rereading of his compelling *Pictures and Progress*?

CL: I was attracted to his views on image-making and perception. He described humans as the only picture-making animal. I was intrigued by this idea of our animality being tied to machinery and the mimetic quality of picture making. Douglass was photographed quite often, and his take on our photographic obsession is pertinent in this contemporary moment.

NDE: Can you talk about the work that you developed in your studio, within the galleries of El Museo del Barrio, and as part of “Office Hours”? How did the presence of Frederick Douglass manifest itself in this space?

CL: The work I developed during my time as part of “Office Hours” is tied to perception and representation. A mural based on one of Adrian Piper’s philosophical teaching tools on the work of Kant acts as a seemingly didactic anchor in the center of the space. A mural of a hashtag or number sign rests on the adjacent wall. The third part of my work at El Museo is a series of drawings on plexiglass that quote the Friday Foster comic series. All the work incorporates organic juice I made myself to use as a drawing tool.

NDE: What is the meaning of the elements that your piece comprises?

CL: The work is tied to understanding how race is used as a medium that we see things through. The Friday Foster character, written by Jim Lawrence and illustrated by Spanish cartoonist Jorge Longaron, was the first character depicting an African American woman to headline a syndicated comic strip in the States. The character who was first introduced in 1970 is a photographer’s assistant turned model who was raised in Harlem. She is derived from Daniel Defoe’s character Man Friday from his 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*. Friday is taught English and converted to Christianity as Robinson Crusoe’s servant. I was drawn to the notion of Friday as a loyal companion in relation to its later meaning of being an assistant. In contrast to this character there is Piper’s illustration of the empirical self, a generalized human form. Here the idea of creating the subject through images is tied to technologies of power. My use of organic materials to make this work is related to a growing obsession with healthy active bodies and how the economics of organic food act as a class divider. Both the Frederick Douglass Houses and programs that promote healthy eating are part of the same system of social engineering. They seek to normalize the population in order to keep it productive.

NDE: What are the responses your work and steady inhabitation of the gallery space elicit from those who visit El Museo or work for this organization? I saw several people enter your space and talk with you.

CL: Most people were curious to learn more about what I'm working on in the space. Institutions like El Museo del Barrio and the Studio Museum in Harlem are of the utmost importance to me as an artist of Caribbean descent. Working here brought me back to the same neighborhood I went to high school in. Now, as a recent M.F.A. graduate, the support I received from both people who work at El Museo and its visitors truly helped push me.

NDE: How has working in the context of a museum gallery shaped your process? Most people, maybe less so than before, expect to come to a museum to look at finished artworks. In your case, they caught you "red-handed," in the act of making art.

CL: Making work became a performatic operation. It was a step beyond installing a work due to the experimental nature of being in one's studio as opposed to producing a piece that has already been planned ahead. It also allowed me to think of ways of making that would fit within the strict regulations of being in public.

NDE: Were there any interactions between you and the security team at El Museo? I am always intrigued by what museum guards may think about what artists do.

CL: The security team and I were the only ones consistently working in the galleries. Unlike working in a private studio, there was constant feedback on my work. A few of us have family members that were either finishing or beginning chemotherapy and it gave us an unforeseen chance to share some tips.

NDE: Healing became art, as AA Bronson would say. Do you plan to invite those who have collaborated with you at the moment of conceiving "An Assembly: The Conversationists," your project for the residency program at El Museo del Barrio, to interact with the completed artwork in the gallery?

CL: The Harlem based collective I am a part of, called "An Assembly," works on putting together curatorial projects. As the project expands I am hoping to establish an online presence that can archive the varying results of conversations based on the text.

NDE: What kinds of questions would you pose to Frederick Douglass today, taking into consideration that the institution of slavery, as he knew it, no longer exists, yet keeping in mind that the subject is as relevant in the twenty first century as it was when he wrote about it? It is clear to me that the act of enslaving others for political and economic reasons continues to morph.

CL: I would be curious as to what strategies he would employ to approach the subtleties of how we are all complicit in the types of enslavement that exist today.

July 2014, New York, NY.