



Contemporary
Arts Center

FIRELEI BÁEZ
TO SEE BEYOND





If we consider the possibility of a “post-race” artist, this fluid, trans-national being could be embodied by Firelei Báez who “grew up knowing,” in her words, “that I was part of a very slippery in-between space of binary-defying identities, which is the construction of race in the Caribbean, not fitting easily into one category.” Born to a Dominican mother and a Haitian father, Báez grew up in the Dominican market city of Dajabón which marks the border between the two countries (colonized decades earlier by Spain and France), and whose river stood witness to a massacre of thousands of Haitians in 1937. In this long-conflicted, post-colonial space, Báez was raised by multiple women in her family after her mother moved to the United States – living an eclectic education at the intersection of African, Latino and eventually American cultures. But when she arrived fully in the latter, immigrating to Miami at the age of ten, she faced a rigid application of race that evacuated the richness of hybridity and essentialized surfaces as signatures. Lamenting the lack of an unwieldy, invigorating “in-between,” Báez has notably observed, “There’s a fluidity of color, of race, in the Caribbean...In America, you’re black or white.” As a remedy to this prescriptive demarcation, Báez lives and works as a self-declared “bridge” and speaks in a painterly language spanning autobiography, folklore, civil rights, feminism, craft and futurism. Her materials and use of color are equally eclectic, marrying ink, pattern, paint and applications of drawing and collage into exuberant compositions that re-imagine the body and its relationship to both myth and nature. Elements of her childhood appear often in this primordial soup where enduring traditions of portraiture, still life and landscape are melted into politically charged alloys that propose an expanded field of ethnicity. With an abundance of ingredients and a dearth of absolutes, Báez paints an intersectional future that expresses, in her words, “the layered histories that make up individuals, and all the alternative possible selves that can emerge.”

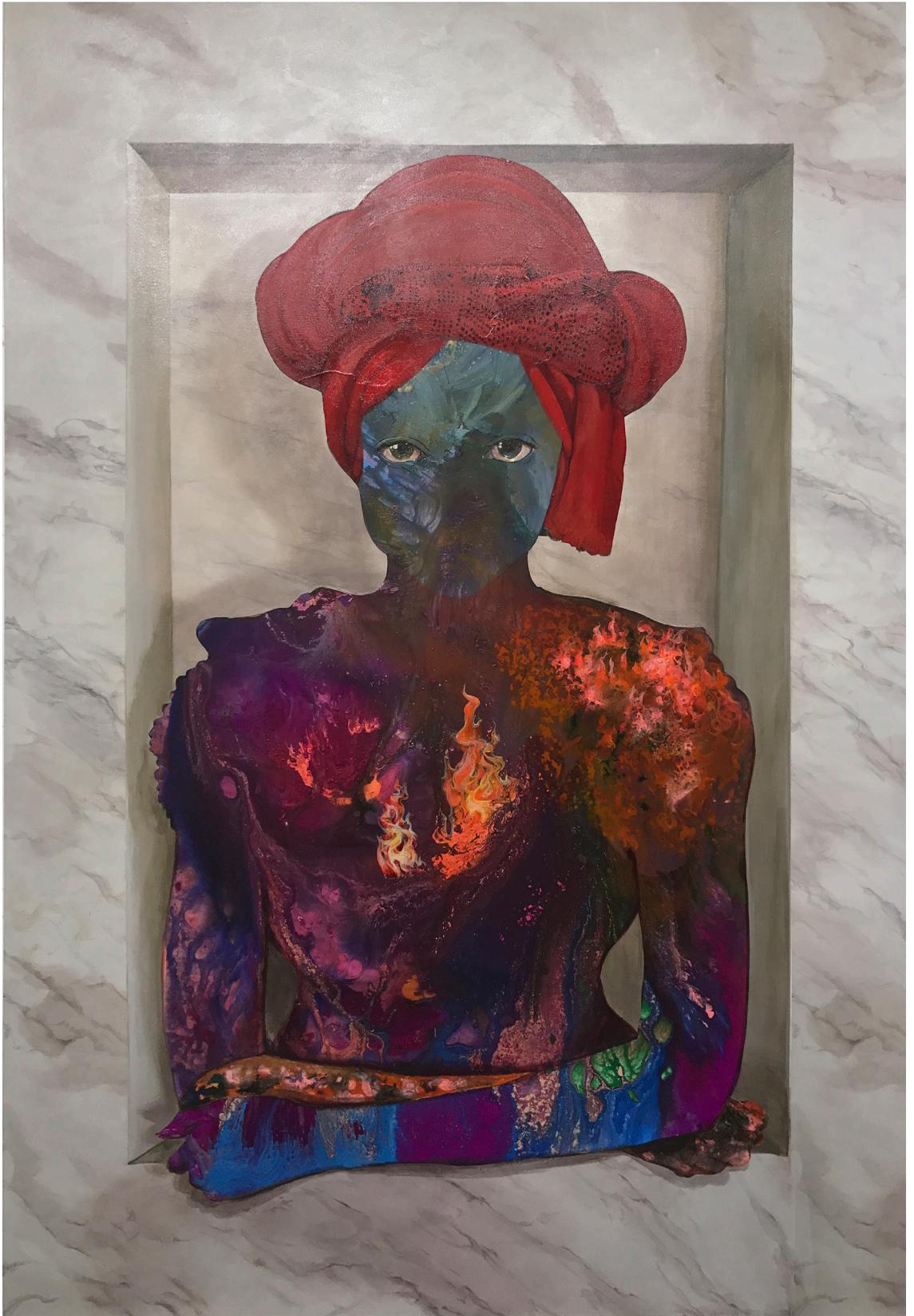
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Báez's pan-historical navigation of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, where syncretism and adaptation meet colonialism, displacement and trauma, finds precedent in the mixing of ancestries known as "mestizaje." In an effort to challenge Western theories of racial purity/superiority and address the maligned position of indigenous peoples, Mexican philosopher and educator José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) imagined a "cosmic race" emerging from the mingling of African, European and indigenous peoples in Latin America. As a means to celebrate the ambiguities and amalgams of the New World rather than bemoan the blurring of past orthodoxies, mestizaje was championed as the future of national harmony and social progress. In practice, however, this concept has also justified violent acts of assimilation and cultural appropriation that reduced diversity, preserved economic disparity, and perpetuated hegemony under the banner of unity. To resuscitate the ideals of this concept and shed its more malignant applications, Chicano theorists and writers in the 1960s reformulated mestizaje as a contemporary third space where enduring prejudices would be marginalized and dissipated. This refreshed model resonates decades later in feminist Gloria E. Anzaldúa's 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, where she opens up her autobiography to elucidate the notion of a porous, trans-national identity amalgamating mythology, poetry, politics and history. And while the maxim of the mestizo/mestiza will never be free of blindspots, this contemporary application across a multitude of locations signals the rise of a movement proportionate to its swelling population – spoken as much in words and theories as figures and faces.

The human engine of this paradigm shift has very much shaped the work of Báez, who identifies "portraiture, which has a very clear history in Western tradition," as "the ideal medium to talk about these contested issues." She also references another micro-tradition within this lineage known as the "casta" painting, which visualized the halcyon existence of mestizo peoples to mixed results. In the shadow of Imperialism, where racial categories had (and continue to have) social and legal ramifications, "casta" is an Iberian term for the mixed-race peoples that proliferated in post-Conquest Spain as a result of coupling between European whites, American Indians, Mexicans and Africans. Their painted portrayals were done mostly by middling Mexican artists and were considered as humble, but no less cherished, exotica that would be displayed in homes alongside icons dedicated to patrons and saints. These idyllic paintings depicted colonial social life and mixed-race peoples in sublimated terms to counter the ruling class' anxiety about the erosion of socio-racial hierarchies that privileged a white Spanish elite. Evaluating the ambivalent legacy of these images today, Báez observes, "They were supposed to enact a kind of social violence, but at the same time they are some of the first intimate, and very tender portraits of mixed families." Alongside renderings of flora and fauna native to the "New World," and costumes and professions meant to characterize the capacity of this hybrid population, Báez propels this "casta" family into the 21st century and a resurgent terrain of political agency.

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De Español, y Albina, Torna atrás.



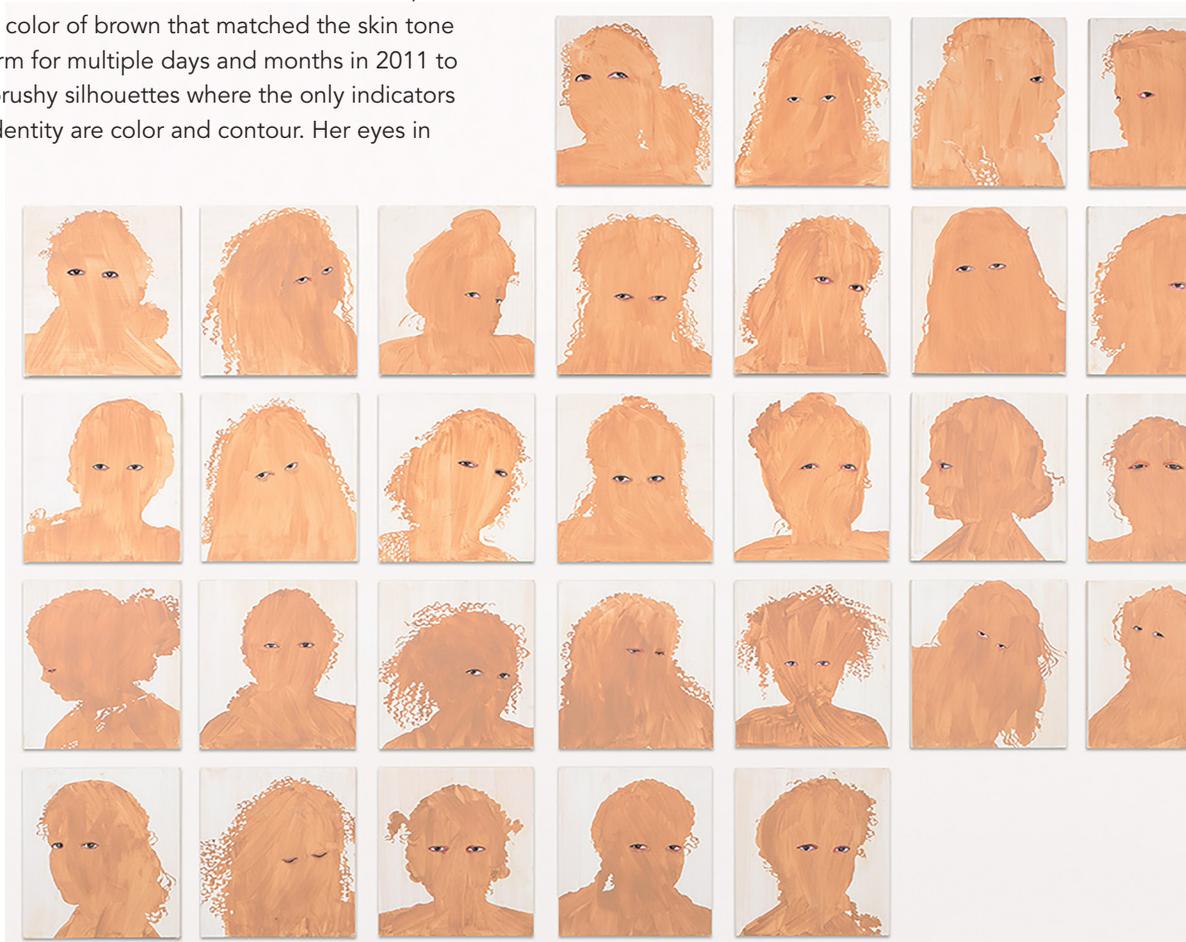


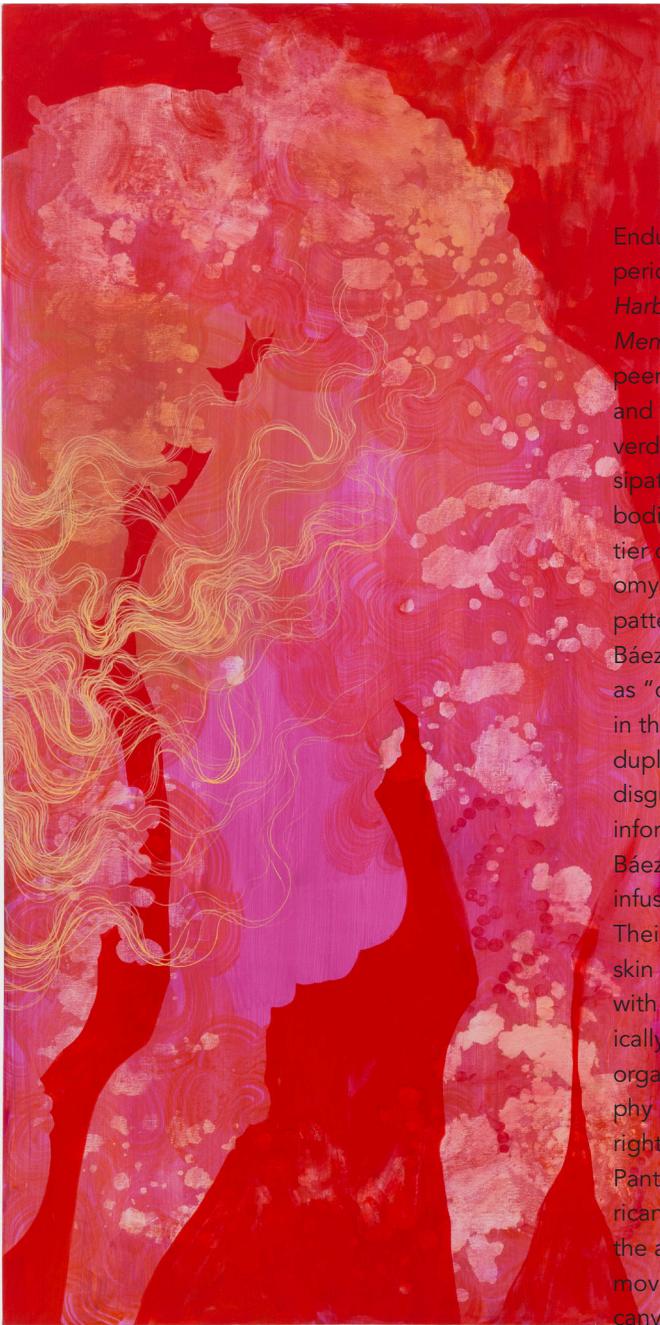
Above: for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2017, Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

Right: Can I Pass? Introducing the Paper Bag to the Fan Test for the Month of June, 2011, Collection of Tad Freese and Brook Hartzell

Rather than a portrait that entrenches a resolute identity into a particular place and standing in time, the many faces of Firelei Báez propose a contingent countenance that looks backward and forward at once. Drawing upon her personal experiences of the politics attached to skin tone, hair texture and physiognomy, these portraits swim between revelation and obfuscation to confront what she calls a “long tradition of disguise” in the U.S., and that of “having to choose between binary choices for people of color within the totalitarian narrative of identity.” Her ensuing works are defiant renderings of radically contingent beings, “saved from abstraction,” according to critic Jared Quinon, “by their piercing eyes and distinctive fashions and hairstyles.” She begins pointedly with herself, confronting pseudo-scientific tests of “blackness” in a series of self-portraits arranged in calendar-like grids entitled *Can I Pass? Introducing the Paper Bag to The Fan Test for the Month of...* (2011). In enduring exercises of “colorism” and racial phenotypes in this country, it is said that if one’s skin tone is lighter than a brown paper bag and your hair can flow straight back from a fan’s breeze, then one can “pass” in mainstream society as white. To demonstrate the myopia of such tests to ascertain the character of an individual, Báez mixed a color of brown that matched the skin tone of her arm for multiple days and months in 2011 to create brushy silhouettes where the only indicators of her identity are color and contour. Her eyes in

each of these iterations look intensely outward, anchoring the amorphous swirls and reminding the viewer there is a human behind blunt historical blindspots. A similar dynamic informs the institution of the headscarf known as a “tignon” for women of color in New Orleans after 18th century Spanish colonization, which were meant to deter the seduction of upstanding European gentleman. In turn, many of these women converted an imposed tool of oppression into a vehicle of expression, ornamentation and resistance via fabrics, feathers, beads and baubles. In the 2017 painting for *Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled keeper of order, Anacaona*, Báez adorns a suggested portrait of Haiti’s exiled 19th century queen with an exquisite red turban, while her body becomes the site for a churning cosmology of stars, pools and flares. Trappings of skin tone are thusly replaced by evocations of Vasconcelos’ “cosmic race” as this figure leans out beyond her marble niche and its antiquated attempts to sequester her in a sculptural past. Her eyes smolder fiercely and unrelentingly in response, looking out at us once again, refusing to let one forget.





Enduring, elemental female figures ardently denying periodization also populate the aptly titled paintings *Harbinger of Strong Forces* (2014) and *Voice After Memory (June 20th)* (2015) where Baez enconces peering silhouettes with blooms of aqueous color and nebulous flora. Their piercing eyes push these verdant constellations towards and around us, dissipating the suggestion of shrouds and silence with bodies that exceed their biology. The ensuing frontier collapses the conventional figure-ground dichotomy of painting to marry fleshy, sinuous bodies with patterns, landscapes and folklore. For inspiration Baez looks especially to the mythical creature known as "ciguapa," an enchanting, but dangerous female in the trickster tradition known for mutable features, duplicitous practices, and backwards facing legs that disguise her direction. These fugitive characteristics inform a pantheon of powerful, voluptuous figures in Baez's work who, much like her canvases in general, infuse beauty and seduction with bite and sting. Their complexion is no less chameleonesque as the skin of these women becomes noticeably festooned with writing and renderings – turning what we typically perceive as barrier to the world into a porous organ of exchange. Baez treats political iconography in an equally syncretic manner, marrying civil rights symbols of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Panther party with Caribbean movements, North African revolutions and Latino mysticism. In so doing, the appearance of a clenched fist or curling snake moves across multiple activations in her maximal canvases – accruing agency while shedding regional specificity. Such accelerating synthesis can be seen in a series of 2016 paintings including *Goldie (in Clío's Presence)*, *A modest mythology of walls*, and *a name that doesn't exist*, where mutable Rubenesque forms undergo beguiling metamorphosis. The searing eyes of Baez's earlier portraits and figure studies are noticeably absent here, jettisoning recognizable staples of subjectivity to twist and torque the body into a more radical, re-combinatory entity.



Top: *Goldie (in Clío's presence)*, 2016, Collection of Denise & Gary Gardner

Below: *Collector of shouts (April 21)*, 2016, Courtesy of Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, Missouri

The fellow 2016 painting *Collector of Shouts* (April 21) anticipates this biomorphic shift, bridging the aforementioned portraits of 2014/2015 by locating a silhouetted woman in profile within a deluge of large, multi-colored droplets. The staring eyes are still present here, but the contours of her nebulous body are blurred into an advancing environment that Báez identifies as “[getting] closer to spirit for me, to a psychological interiority.” In so doing, she speaks to the ambivalent treatment of the colonized body where it is both a repository of experience as well as a commodity to attack, collect and exploit. Within the violent flux of diaspora, slavery, exile and migration, Cuban novelist and essayist Antonio Benítez Rojo (1931-2005) poignantly argued that the body is the only witness for people robbed of their histories and place. In response, Báez confronts the conundrum of how to acknowledge the presence and politics of the body in her work while shedding its baggage and moving towards a more diffuse state of being (and thinking) that slips historical restraints. In this light, the 2015 painting *To see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls* is especially apropos, reflecting and projecting a radiant consciousness that exceeds physical parameters. It is one of a series of works informed by Báez’s reading of the “Jhator” tradition of Tibetan Buddhism – an unorthodox funerary practice in which bodies are dismembered and placed on mountaintops so that birds of prey may take them off to the heavens. For Buddhists, the body is a vessel we temporarily occupy, and that whose weight and weakness can be shed in the next, expanded stage of incarnation. Báez’s “Carib’s Jhator” series imagines a metaphorical Caribbean version of this philosophy via paintings like *To see beyond...*, where the thoughts of a pensive, but restless figure bloom like a solar flare as her body becomes a swirling topography of ethereal color. This vibrant treatment of a mutable, elusive biology resonates through two of her most recent works, *Pleasure to*

Bask and Litany (Collectively Devised) (both 2018), where bountiful female forms swim in and through striped tendrils, shimmering patterns, translucent lace, volumetric cloth and knotted limbs. The result is a partial, dematerialized body that is everywhere and nowhere, floating in and out of focus to spread and surround us like an environment where time, space and subject are equally liquid.



Right: *To see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls*, 2015, Collection of the San Jose Museum of Art, California



*"It is a beginning without end,
and an overture to see beyond."*



Reflecting upon the nexus points her paintings live and advocate, Báez declares, "These works were propositions, meant to create alternate pasts and potential futures, questioning history and culture in order to provide a space for reassessing the present." Figures serve as multi-directional signifiers within this evolving syntax, with the added invitation for audiences to inject their own histories as Báez adds, "I want them to make it as much as I am." And for those who have been marginalized, persecuted or displaced, who in Báez's words, "have seen ourselves as other, and other in ourselves," her paintings pulse like Rorschach blots of abundant possibility. The fortress of self that is sequestered by skin and contained by a body is relentlessly ransacked here as the gestalt gives way to euphoric interconnectivity. The natural world flows in and out of these permeable beings as hierarchies, hegemony and assigned categories yield to kaleidoscopic rapture. Every painting is thus an utopian maquette, as seen in *A Fever, a daydream* (2017) where a pair of figures become the fields for overflowing flowers, the sprightly colors of spring, and two sets of eyes that are more peaceful than piercing – embracing a seductive swoon. This fevered daydream is not naïve idealism or a denial of the enormous socio-political hardship that continues to plague humankind, but rather a vision of a place where race is rich, fertile and roaming. Báez calls it "a willful, stubborn hopefulness" on her part, looking to a horizon that could be much like *Four of the Sun (or the talking cure)* (2017), where all suggestion of bodies and eyes has succumb to free-floating skeins of liquid color that swirl in/to a brilliant garden. If this is a casta painting of today, or perhaps tomorrow, it is one that replaces divisive socio-racial categorization with emancipated bloodlines and DNA that transcends code. It is a beginning without end, and an overture to see beyond.

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TO SEE BEYOND

May 18 through August 19, 2018

Curated by Steven Matijcio

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Stephen and Sandra Joffe, Jimmy and Lauren Miller, the WOMXN, Linda and Jim Miller, Maria Kalomenidou and Yannis Skoufalos, Sue Friedlander, and Artswave Corporate Partner: The Kroger Co.

Firelei Báez was born in 1981 in Santiago de los Caballeros, a city on the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The stark contrast between the economic struggles of Haiti and the abundance of the Dominican Republic is a dichotomy that continues to inform her work. When Báez was ten her family moved to the United States, where she attended Miami Jackson High School in Florida. She went on to receive a BFA from Cooper Union, an MFA from Hunter College, and has studied at The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Báez's work has been featured in numerous museum exhibitions, including shows at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, the Pérez Art Museum, Miami, The Andy Warhol Museum, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, the New Museum, New York, the Bronx Museum, New York, the Studio Museum, New York, and the Museum of Latin American Art, Los Angeles. In 2017 she participated in the Venice Biennale and was on the shortlist of both the Rome Prize and the Future Generations Art Prize (sponsored by the Pinchuk Art Foundation) in Kiev, Ukraine. Báez has been covered extensively in the media, with major articles appearing in *The New York Times*, *Art in America* and *The Los Angeles Times*, among others. Her work was also the subject of a monograph published in 2015 by the Pérez Art Museum Miami titled *Firelei Báez: Bloodlines*. Báez is included in numerous private and institutional collections, including that of the Pérez Art Museum, the San Jose Museum of Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem. She will be featured in the upcoming 2018 Berlin Biennial in Germany.

Exhibition Checklist

- **Can I Pass? Introducing the Paper Bag to the Fan Test for the Month of June**; 2011; Gouache and ink on paper; Collection of Tad Freese and Brook Hartzell
- **Harbinger of Strong Forces**; 2014; Acrylic and ink on Yupo paper; Collection of Amelia Gandara and Alex Frommeyer
- **To see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls**; 2015; Gouache and ink on paper; Collection of the San Jose Museum of Art, California
- **Voice After Memory (June 20th)**; 2015; Acrylic and Sennellier ink on Yupo paper; Collection of Jamie G. Anderson
- **A modest mythology of walls**; 2016; Acrylic on canvas; Collection of Michelle Fabrizi
- **A name that doesn't exist**; 2016; Acrylic on canvas; Collection of Laura Heberton-Shlomchik and Mark Shlomchik
- **Collector of shouts (April 21)**; 2016; Acrylic on Yupo paper; Courtesy of Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, Missouri
- **Four of the sun (or the talking cure)**; 2016; Acrylic on Yupo paper; Collection of John E. Ellis, MD
- **Goldie (in Clio's presence)**; 2016; Acrylic on canvas; Collection of Denise & Gary Gardner
- **A Fever, a daydream**; 2017; Acrylic on canvas; Collection of Dawn and Chris Fleischer
- **for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona**; 2017; Oil on canvas; Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody
- **Litany (collectively devised)**; 2018; Oil on canvas; The Private Collection of Audrey Adams and Lauren Maillian
- **Pleasure to Bask**; 2018; Oil on canvas; The Private Collection of Audrey Adams and Lauren Maillian

*All works by Firelei Baez unless otherwise noted
Images Courtesy of Firelei Baez, Gallery Wendi Norris and Kavi Gupta Gallery*

Cover: *A name that doesn't exist*; 2016; Acrylic on canvas, Collection of Laura Heberton-Shlomchick and Mark Shlomchik