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ART

A Golden Critique of Colonialism

Carlos Rolón's latest body of work transforms the iconography of Spanish colonialism in the Americas while elevating memories and images from his childhood in Chicago's Puerto Rican community.

Sarah Rose Sharp May 24, 2018



Carlos Rolón, "Boombox Edition" (2018), edition of five (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic, unless otherwise noted)

DETROIT — The first thing to catch one's eye upon entering Carlos Rolón's solo exhibition, *Buscando América*, at Library Street Collective, is a wall of vintage boomboxes — familiar and nostalgic as cutting-edge technology for any child of the 1980s, and at least aesthetically imposing for anyone else. The piece is not titled; it is not a piece of art strictly speaking, but a display of Rolón's personal collection and that of one of his oldest friends, Hector

Gonzalez. One glowing boombox stands on its own, facing this display. This *is* a piece of art, one of an edition of five in Rolón's *Boombox Edition* (2018) series, and without touching it, it's impossible to tell if it's a functioning piece of electronics at all, or simply the same shape as its real-world counterparts, cast in Cascadia fiberglass and metal, and covered in 24-karat gold leaf. (Spoiler alert: it is, in fact, the latter.)



A collection of vintage boomboxes in the anteroom gallery of the Library Street Collective space

The tension between these two forces — the recollection of personal memory and its translation into glamorous, shiny art objects — is the animating force of Rolón's ongoing work, which plucks common objects out of his childhood as a first-generation child of Puerto Rican immigrants in Chicago. These objects are recreated or staged in fine art settings — from fairs like [Art Basel](#), to the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#), to the 2007 Venice Biennale, to a wide array of galleries and institutions [worldwide](#). Most recently in Detroit, Rolón, staged a [full-blown installation in the Mike Kelley Mobile Homestead](#) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, which recreated aspects of his childhood home within the facsimile of the childhood home of artist [Mike Kelley](#), and staged an active nail art salon, like his mother's work-from-home business, during the exhibition run.

The space at Library Street Collective is less explicitly domestic than some of Rolón's other installations, but the gallery has been reconfigured to mimic a series of rooms, as one might encounter in a ranch-style house or a railroad apartment. Moving from the anteroom gallery, one

enters a sort of otherworldly dining room, with a low-hung crystal chandelier dominating the center of the space. “Dreamers” (2018) combines this vintage chandelier with a wrap-around neon sign that repeats the word “DREAMERS” in vivid blue that ricochets off the surrounding crystals. The piece is amplified by a series of mirrors on three walls, that create points of brightness and vivid breaks in the dark and heavy jungle-motif wallpaper that lines the walls.



Carlos Rolón, “Dreamers” (2018), installation view



Carlos Rolón, “Irma” (2018), detail view

“Mirrors, wallpaper and ceramic tiles adorned my family’s domiciles on the island,” said Rolón, elaborating on his artist statement in an email interview with Hyperallergic. “These materials allowed a makeshift home in Puerto Rico made from cinderblock and corrugated metal to seem larger and grander than normal. This translated to my parents’ home in the US, to create a sense of comfort and identity. While triumphant, this aesthetic signals a process of adaptation and has become an integral component throughout my work.”

And yet, Rolón’s highly stylized mirrored works omit the baseline function of a mirror: they do not present a clear reflection. From the fractal crystalline surface of “Untitled (Gold Reja)” (2016), to the geometric purple dichroic glass of “Gatekeeper Ponce Reja III” (2016), to the chaotic whirl of hand-cut silver mirror fragments in “Irma” (2018), one cannot look to these mirrors for an accurate vision of oneself and one’s surroundings. Again, Rolón has drawn the touchstone objects of home and hearth into a world where form has so thoroughly superseded function as to obscure it entirely. This notion is particularly poignant in the context of the show’s title, *Buscando América* — or, “Looking for America.”



Carlos Rolón, “Gatekeeper Ponce Reja III” (2016), detail view

“My practice is informed by a post-colonial and Afro-Caribbean diasporic vantage point,” said Rolón. “What has always motivated me is to create work so that I can see ‘myself’ or a story I can relate to as a young Latino born and raised in Chicago in a blue-collar setting. Someone who deals with conflict of identity.” It is clear that Rolón is not only looking for an America that matches his roots, but perhaps, short of finding one, is remaking the country’s iconography in his own image.

The exhibition’s title also evokes ideas of colonialism in pursuit of wealth, which are closely tied to Puerto Rico’s history in Rolón’s newest body of work, *Gild the Lily (Decadence Upon Decadence)*, and follows some works on display at Library Street Collective in the *Spanish Gold* series. Both bodies of work are inspired by the Spanish colonial discovery of gold in Puerto Rico and the Gulf of Mexico, which necessitated the removal of exotic tropical flora and vegetation for extraction. These

ideas manifest as large, highly decorative and lush floral oil paintings, with oversized renderings of colorful and detailed tropical leaves and flowers presented atop a field of 24-karat gold-leafed canvases.



Carlos Rolón, “Bahamian Love Vine (Spanish Gold VI)” (2017), oil and 24-karat gold leaf on canvas (image courtesy of Library Street Collective)

“Enough gold was mined until 1530 to establish over four million dollars in Spanish bullion,” said Rolón. “This series of floral paintings making use of real 24-karat gold leaf generates a sense of hope and beauty as well as melancholic notes from the past. These works represent my reimagined

replacement of the natural beauty that lived and breathed atop the minerals that brought wealth and abundance to colonizing cultures, contrasting the ideas of nature and territory.”

There is a sense, in Rolón’s work, of a heart divided. On one hand, there is a strong and sincere connection to the past, and a yearning for those objects that remain constant in a life journey that has clearly ranged across place and class. There is something generous and inclusive about Rolón’s desire to present work that is grounded in recognizable, quotidian objects. But on the other hand, that inclusivity is complicated by the objects’ transposition into luxurious materials and exclusive art-world settings (the opening at LSC was monitored by an imposing-looking bouncer, stationed just next to the wall of boomboxes). Whatever critique might be leveled here at the Spanish pursuit of gold in Puerto Rico, ultimately the gold standard is literally reinforced by lavish use of gold leaf finishes. Rolón, it seems, wants it both ways — or perhaps it would be more poignant and generous to say he belongs to both worlds, floating somewhere between a heart of 24-karat gold leaf, and a genuine heart of gold.

Carlos Rolón: Buscando América continues at Library Street Collective (1260 Library Street, Detroit, Michigan) through June 2.