

¡PRESENTE!

On View 07.22 – 10.17
at El Museo del Barrio

THE YOUNG LORDS IN NEW YORK



The Young Lords Party and El Museo del Barrio were born of the same spirit of need in the same place and time—East Harlem, 1969.

The Young Lords Legacy and the Collection of El Museo del Barrio

Between 1969 and 1972, the Young Lords Party in New York worked towards gaining access to key services for residents of El Barrio (East Harlem), the South Bronx and Luisada (Lower East Side). Inspired by the original Young Lords from Chicago, who were in turn inspired by the Black Panther Party, a group of young Puerto Ricans traveled to Chicago in 1969 to ask for permission to found a New York chapter of the group. They returned with the idea of asking their neighbors from El Barrio about how they could be most helpful to the local Puerto Rican community.

This direct connection to the people of their neighborhood would become the cornerstone of the Young Lords' political activity. It would lead them to take on projects as varied as health-care and education reform, programs for poor children and families, actions that served to improve life in the severely underserved Puerto Rican neighborhoods of New York. Eventually, a desire to aid in the independence movement in Puerto Rico permanently changed the group's focus and direction.

Walking through the streets of El Barrio in July 1969, a group of residents, activists, and students, began asking their Puerto Rican neighbors about their biggest concerns and the answer was nearly unanimous: the garbage. The city's Department of Sanitation rarely came to pick up garbage. When the agency refused to lend extra brooms to clean the neighborhood, the group swept up the uncollected garbage, piled it on Second and Third Ave. in East Harlem, and set it ablaze, halting traffic for hours and bringing much needed attention to the problem.

Within a few days, the mayor's special assistant came to visit the neighborhood and sanitation trucks began making regular stops in East Harlem shortly thereafter. Following their lead, many more young people joined the cause and activism of the Young Lords, hoping to help improve access to education, housing, jobs, and health care.

Among the Young Lord's other significant political actions in East Harlem is their takeover of the First Spanish Methodist Church of East Harlem (which they later renamed the People's Church). This was a



Top: Hiram Martinez, *North West Corner of 11th Street, garbage thrown across 3rd Ave. 1969 / 2015*. Modern giclée print made from vintage negative, 16 x 20 in., Courtesy of the artist.
Above: Installation shot, featuring Domingo García, *Indignados*—El Museo del Barrio, 1977. Lithograph, 24 x 25 in., © Museo del Barrio.

long process which was undertaken in order to establish a free breakfast program and clothing give-aways at the church, which they felt was underused and inaccessible to the surrounding community.

In response to lack of action in East Harlem by the city's health administrators, the Young Lords also organized the seizure and rebuying of a truck with hospital equipment to where it was needed most. They organized numerous protests against police brutality, including a procession commemorating Julio Roldán, who died while under police custody.



The Young Lords' campaigns and political environment are captured in the exhibition in photographs by Maximiliano Colón, Frank Espada, and Tom Lesley. The most important figure in this genre is the Young Lords' official photographer and one of its earliest members, Hiram Maristany, who was born and raised in East Harlem. Maristany's photographs directly document all of the actions of the Young Lords throughout their most active years. The artist's composition, his attention to light and to capturing the right moment emphasizes his connection and commitment to the actions and initiatives of his fellow members in the movement.

El Museo's contribution to this multi-venue exhibition draws on works from the museum's own collection, including copies of the Young Lords weekly newspaper, *Palante*. It also includes a publication from February 1972 titled *Ideology of the Young Lords Party*, an icon from the collection of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at the Hunter College School of Social Work in East Harlem. The authors of the publication are Juan González, Juan "El" Ortiz, Gloria González, David Pérez, Denise Oliver, and Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán, all of whom were members of the Young Lords' central committee at the time.

Also on display are political prints by Antonio Martorell, Domingo García, and Marcos Dimas. García's print memorializes the 1977 takeover of the Statue of Liberty which involved some of the Young Lords. Through El Museo del Barrio, this image becomes a print by Domingo García titled *Felidades—El Museo del Barrio*. This gesture of using the image of an "occupied" Statue of Liberty indicates the significance of the original radical political gesture as well as the institution's identification with the protesters' sentiments. The act reflected a cry for freedom for political prisoners associated with the Puerto Rican independence movement. El

Museo's adaptation of the image and the action to illustrate holiday sentiments reflects its concern for the issues raised by the independence movement.

The iconic photograph that documented the takeover of the statue in New York harbor serves as the inspiration for a work by Coco López that was commissioned by El Museo specifically for this exhibition. López's work brings together plastic bags, plastiline clay, printed paper, and other found materials to create a three-dimensional version of the indelible image of the Statue of Liberty emblazoned with the Puerto Rican flag.

Marcos Dimas's print features the powerful figure of Puerto Rican nationalist Raphael Emerson Betances, his huge hands wrapped around an automatic weapon. The portrait is based on a well-known photograph of Huey Newton in which Newton is seated in a throne-like wicker chair with a spear in one hand and a shotgun in the other, two African sculptures on either side, all atop a zebra skin rug. Dimas's use of the woodcut ties him to historic artistic movements that favored the use of the woodcut for both political and aesthetic reasons. During the artistic movements of the early twentieth century in particular, the woodcut came to symbolize modernity in the guise of a medium for the masses. The Young Lords would use Dimas's print on the cover of an issue of *Palante*.

Antonio Martorell's print, *Fuera la Marina Yanqui de Culebra* (1970) is a silkscreen that features a tri-colored sky against which we see the powerful form of a woman. With one hand she holds her young child, while an infant lies in the crook of the same arm. With the other hand she makes a fist, gesturing at the distant silhouettes of U.S. naval ships. This poster was made at Taller Alacrán, active 1968-1971, which supported young artists who were interested in expressing dissidence through

the print or poster medium. The statement expresses the feeling of many Puerto Ricans on the island who began in the early 1970s to protest the use of the island as a bombing practice site by the U.S. Navy. These operations were moved to Vieques in 1975 and the U.S. Navy eventually also left Vieques in 2003 under pressure from many activist groups.

Among the gems in the exhibition and El Museo's collection are a group of posters from the 1970s and 1980s—many designed by unknown artists—announcing protests, conferences, and meetings that focused on the movement for Puerto Rican independence. Included are one poster in French and two others that announce a conference in Mexico City, underscoring the global support for the island's independence from the United States. The designs of these posters are spare and powerful, often evoking the entangled history of the two nations with formidable signs such as chains (broken or wrapped around wrists), eagles or doves, and the indelible symbol of the Puerto Rican flag.

The exhibition also features other works that embrace the political spirit of the legacy of the Young Lords, including works commissioned specifically for this exhibition that range from ceramic work to wood sculpture to found objects.

Miguel Luciano's work is a sculptural version of the iconic poster produced by the Young Lords that depicts four large purple AK-47s on a flat black background, each of which features a key word that for the Young Lords symbolizes aspects of their activism: health, food, housing, education, and each



one is underscored by the word *struggle*. Using cutout wood versions of the guns and car paint, Luciano's work acknowledges the Young Lords' savvy use of aesthetics and design in support of the cause and renders the poster as a new kind of object that extends the life of their powerful messages and deposits them directly into the space of the gallery cube.

The history of the Young Lords, their intellectual pursuits and inspirations, forms the physical and conceptual basis of the work by artist J.C. Lanahan, *Young Lords: Keeping It More than One Hundred*, who previously created a similar work on the legacy of the Black Panthers. The work consists of a stack of books well over 100 high, each of which the artist selected as possible inspiration for the Young Lords and their ideology. Among the titles we find crucial texts such as Miguel Meléndez's *We Took the Streets*, Marguerite Rush Lerner's *The Story of Skin Color*, Irving Rouse's *The Indians: Rise and Decline of the People who Greeted Columbus*, Matt Sintonen's *The Socratic Tradition*, Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Hsuan and Miller's *Multicultural Nationalism*, Herman Briffault's *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*, and many other key texts.

Shellyne Rodriguez investigates the history of the Young Lords as well as prospects of future generations through her found object and ceramic work. Her sculpture features an industrial broom that has been seared black from fire, a reference both to the Garbage Offensive and the historical context of burning buildings in the South Bronx from the late 1970s. The brooms' bristles are replaced with ceramic teeth, a reference to the difficulties of the dangers of being engulfed by violence and poverty but also to the bite of organized people power. Tied to the top of the broom is an Azabache fist, a traditional object often used as a protective symbol and here meant to refer to the clenched fist of Black Power.

Presente! brings together objects from El Museo del Barrio's own collection and photographs from the unique Young Lords collection from Hiram Maristany's body of work. These, together with new works commissioned by young artists provide an opportunity to explore the important legacy of the Young Lords. In the wake of their profound effects on the social and political lives of underserved and oppressed New Yorkers, El Museo del Barrio's collection serves as a path for further understanding their significance in the history of our city.

Rocio Aranda-Alvarado



Top Left: Hiram Maristany, Young Lords with Newspaper, 1970/2003; Modern silver print in order from white negative, 25 x 16 in.; Courtesy of the artist.

Above Left: Artist not identified, National Puerto Rican March for Justice, Washington, D.C., October 4, 1969; Offset lithograph, 11 x 11 in.; Courtesy of the artist.

Top Right: Hiram Maristany, *Palante*, a Proclamation with Youth, 1970/2003; Modern silver print from white negative, 11 x 11 in.; Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom Right: Jaime Varnas, *GULEBRA NO SE VENDE*, Sebaste, New York, 1970; Marcha a Washington, D.C.; Offset lithograph, 18 x 14 in.; El Museo del Barrio.

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