“Cafecito” with Tessa Mars (2024)

Venue: University of Puerto Rico Río Piedras Campus

Moderator: Glorisabel Santos Santos

Translation: Alejandro Álvarez Nieves

Introduction

GLORISABEL:

Good morning. Welcome, everyone. Born in Ponce in 1985...in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tessa Mars is a visual artist whose work features her efforts to reconnect with a Haitian perspective of the world. Her work delves into the legacy of the Haitian revolution in terms of our contemporary understandings of resistance, survival, adaptability, and creation. She is interested in the spirituality that accompanies her through various trips on Haitian soil and abroad and wants to explore the role of women in narrating and transmitting the knowledge and skills at the heart of the construction of communal identity. Her creative flow is inspired by Haitian myths and legends, the daily events of Haitian society, her relatives, and her own experience as a Haitian woman and migrant. Tessa Mars’s recent works—encompassing paintings, audio pieces, and papier-mâché objects—strive to locate a spiritual space of migration, emphasizing connections to the land and the concept of belonging. Mars reintroduces the notion of travel into a continuum that links the first inhabitants of the territories with the newcomers who pass through them. In doing so, Tessa aims to reaffirm the universality and timelessness of shared experiences, offering visions of more serene possible futures through her art. Tessa Mars, who currently resides in Puerto Rico, continues to captivate the people with her visually stunning and thought-provoking explorations of Haitian culture and identity. Her most recent exhibitions have been “Your Presence Does Not Escape Me” at the Tijuana Gallery in London, England, and “On Sovereign Elements” at the Slow Art Foundation in Philadelphia, United States. She did her residency as a student at the Dutch School Rijksacademie Van Veldende, in Amsterdam, from 2020 to 2022. In

addition, she has participated in the renowned biennials of Venice in 2011 and Berlin in 2018, in the 54th and 10th editions, respectively.

Your work challenges conventional historical narratives about Haiti, by offering new perspectives and reinterpretations of your history. How do you think your art can influence the way Haiti's contribution to world history is perceived and the demystification of negative stereotypes?

TESSA:

Hello, everyone. Thank you for being here. And, once again, I'm happy to meet you, Glorisabel. My first preoccupation, truly, is to reengage, first, as a Haitian person, with conversations that are taking place inside the island. The Haitian Revolution is an event that has a widespread impact on our society, where this is a conversation that always is always happening in our daily lives. I grew up thinking about revolution, thinking about what it means to fight for your autonomy, for your independence, but also to be willing to take up arms, and then to start building a society that fits to your vision of who you are as people. And what I found, during my lifetime, is that there was a kind of... A lot of paradoxes when it came to the contemporary lives we are living and the history we are learning about, where it's all about often talking about big dates and big events and heroic figures of the past as if the revolution itself stops there. And there is no connection to what we are living right now. And I wanted, first, to ask myself what it means to be attached to this story. What impact can it have on my life, right now, as a Haitian woman? But also, the conversations that… Talking about which ways, the tools that were created back in 1804 can still help us now to unfold better lives for ourselves, and really connecting to this idea that a revolution is not an event that stops in time, is something that has repercussions all the way down the line. Ad for me, in this way, the Haitian Revolution is still happening right now, as are probably all revolutions around the world.

Tessalines: Identity and Culture

GLORISABEL:

Thanks for sharing this. Contemporary art in Haiti plays a crucial role in the preservation and reinvention of cultural traditions. How do you integrate the history, identity, and contemporary experiences of the Haitian people into your artistic work?

TESSA:

One of the bodies of work that I am most well-known for is one that is centered about, around an "alter-ego" figure I created. This "alter ego" is called Tessalines. And it's a kind of a queering of a figure of the... a father of the Haitian Revolution, which is Dessalines. So, I just took my name and fused it with his. And for me, it was about, first, introducing myself into history. Seeing what being in this position of power, and also of freedom, because, in being the father of the revolution, he has ultimate control on the future of the nation, if you will. And what does inhabiting the skin, queering it, making it... changing genders and taking upon myself this position of being able to move in all directions and what that could bring of conversation. But before it being a playground for me, it was that the political conversation at the time was divided around what hero you identified with. So, there was this political group called The Children of Dessalines. And my curiosity was, what does this really mean to be the son of this person, of this character? But, really deeply, what were the values that were made viable beyond the kind of separation that this brought internally into society. Because it also comes with weight when you say, "I believe in this one; I believe in that one." They had their own values and political agenda, and often, it was along the lines of whether they turned their gaze inward or towards the exterior. And I was just trying to reckon this element of our history for myself. So, I guess, to go back to your question, it felt inevitable that I would have to address these questions before everything else, because the art is, first of all, building myself as a person. And I happen to be Haitian, and so I have to reckon with this element of culture.

Tout Monde C'est Monde

GLORISABEL:

Given Haiti's rich history and its complex relationship with the Haitian Revolution, how do you think your art contributes to preserving and reinterpreting Haitian national identity, especially in terms of the struggle for freedom and self-determination?

TESSA:

A couple of years ago, I read a book that was going to become one of the main texts I'd engage with, when it comes to Haitian history. It is a text by a Haitian historian named Jean Casimir. It is called The Haitians: A Decolonial History. And one of the first things that he writes about in this text is how important it is to look at Haitian history with a Haitian gaze, with Haitian values. And so, one of the first values that he mentions is "tout monde c'est monde," which is that everybody is a person. Everyone is a person. It's difficult to translate this into English, but "tout monde c'est monde" is the root of what you fight for. You're fighting this revolution, because we, as Black people, as people that have been enslaved, are also people. So... I'm sorry, I have to...

Yes. For me, I grew up with this idea of "tout monde c'est monde." I grew up knowing everybody is a person. But then, it's different when you understand what it means in terms of the history you've been taught of the revolution as a fight. It's not just about taking weapons and fighting against an enemy. It is also ideological. It's also about –having said "tout monde c'est monde"– now how do you build your society? How do you understand relationships of power, of who is in charge, of how do you organize your familial units? Engaging with the Haitian revolution and Haitian history, from this point of view, I started understanding better why our society was the way it was. And partly, it was from the beginning, the state that was created was just a repetition of the colonial state. So, all these heroes that you hear about, all the first presidents, they were reinforcing a pattern or a way of organizing society that was about oppression of a class of people. So, it's interesting, because then, in Haiti, you had this massive population that learned to circumvent the state. And it's something you still see now. As a good Haitian, you have to have the skills to know how to go beyond the state and do what you need to

do. So, you will feed your family, you will cultivate the land, and you will –as much as possible– push the State to the side and go around it. And this is a way that's been in operation for the longest time. It's been helpful for us at the beginning, and I think it's probably still the way to go now, because the nation-state has never been something to aspire to. But then, how do you bring that to a contemporary understanding now, because it's not talked about? It is not talked about. It's not the narrative that's pushed, but it's the narrative that's important to engage with. As an artist, I think that's where my voice can be most useful. It's to bring up these conversations and just the suggestion that there's more to investigate and more to take into consideration.

GLORISABEL:

The Haitian diaspora is a significant phenomenon that has shaped Haitian identity and experience. How do you think your art reflects this emotional and spiritual connection to the homeland and how does it contribute to keeping it alive in the Haitian diaspora?

TESSA:

So, when I started doing my work, I was always immediately interested in not only in the experience of Haitians living on the island, but how they moved around the world and how this expression of "Haitianness" manifested itself outside of the borders. So, for the longest time, I was talking about this experience from the point of view of someone who didn't have it on herself. But in 2020, when I had to leave the island myself–and I haven't been back since then–I started understanding what it really means, the things I was talking about before. Living this experience as diaspora and having to reckon with things like finding your community in a space where maybe very few people look like you. What are the tools that my culture instilled in me in dealing with things like that. I think... That the most important... interesting point of view that I got to engage with was in reconnecting with the history of the Caribbean and also understanding this space as a space of connection and movement, contrary to how I grew up, borders, islands being those separate things that are not related to each other. And then, extrapolating it to the

whole world. So, it's natural, it's normal to move in this space, but it's natural and normal to move everywhere, actually, as needed. So, for me, it's about a connection to the land, but a connection that is to the land and to time. And how... How can you build this connection to all the spaces you move through? No matter if you're in the Dominican Republic, if you're here in Puerto Rico, if you're in Chile, where there's a big Haitian community—but, beyond just Haitian people, everybody living through diasporic experiences. It's about building, for ever how long you are in that place, a connection to the land and to the history the stewardship of the land, the people who were living in that space before you, and how you can attach to their experience and their knowledge. Then, maybe, move along further away, but live truer lives, connected to the place where you are. So, I think it's a bit of a shift for me, in terms of how you think about migration and also in terms of the legitimacy in borders. What is a border, really? How can it stop time? How can it stop the movement of the Earth? It represents nothing. So, you should absolutely go wherever you need to be. The Haitian experience, in this sense, is that of all migrants from everywhere. It is a legitimate thing. I hope I am expressing this correctly.

GLORISABEL:

How do you think your work is influencing the representation of Afro-Caribbean women in contemporary art, both locally and internationally?

TESSA:

Well, I'm hopeful, first, that people from all over, women or people who live experiences as women in the world, can identify with a story that I'm telling. And I think it's important that more and more stories are told from this perspective. "Afro-Caribbean" is not necessarily an expression I use for myself, but I think that's a historical fact of Haiti and the connection to Blackness. But having as many stories as possible being present is something that's important to me. And this is also how I connect with artists from all over the world—through their stories, through the work that they share and how they communicate their experiences. And some of the most powerful works I've seen have been from women, from queer people in the space of the

Caribbean . And I think I want to contribute to my perspective, of my experience as a Haitian woman. So, hopefully people connect to it. I know they do, actually. But I think it's important that our voices be heard, because so often they've been invisibilized. And I think we are talking, touching a little bit up on this earlier, that there are others… There are more and more Haitian women in the arts, in Haiti. But you still only hear about a couple of them, and I think that's really the problem.

GLORISABEL:

You're representing them. You are inspiration. As I told you, I shared with you just now, in your work, I think that orality is crucial, the recovery of the history of your ancestors. I ask you, how has that dynamic been to receive that knowledge from your grandmothers, your grandmother, your mother, from all those people who have been uplifted by past generations?

TESSA:

There is a very big spiritual component to my work. And as you said, it has come from my grandmothers and from this rich oral tradition that has been passed down to me. But it's also come from my mother, and her own search for her own need for connection. And she made it a point to have me accompany her through her research and through going to meet the elders and to being there for conversations that I had no way to understand, but that still stayed with me. That there was something there that was very meaningful and powerful, that is to explore. And when I grew up and became an adult, I felt the need to retrace the steps that my mother had already taken, and she taken me on the way with her... And to take it further and to understand it for myself as an adult. And it's my hope, at least when I'm doing work—It's not a hope, it's intentional that I'm trying to connect to something that, maybe, feels a little uncanny or weird. It's because, for me, the texture of life—knowing that there's another dimension to all that you see, human connections and connections to nature. And recently, I've talked a lot about the space that is depicted in my work as a spiritual space. And if I want to bring it back to the idea of how I think about migration, for me, this space is an inner space that connects everyone. You

have, in this space, a legacy of knowledge that is left for you by your ancestors. And so, no matter where you are in the world, you can connect to this space. And all that you see in the painting belongs to this imaginary world that I'm building.

Vegetation and Art

GLORISABEL:

What is the role of native plants and wildlife in your paintings, and how do they contribute to the narrative you're trying to express?

TESSA:

When I started painting, often, the background was just a blank space or just a color. As my ideas started taking more shape, I started to have more natural elements of nature represented. Something that became very present is this space that is almost like a swamp. And the swamp for me is a place where life and death are in an interesting equilibrium. It brings for me back ideas from the matrice... Womb. And so, in my paintings, you often find bodies of water and vegetal elements, which are not necessarily luxurious or green, but represent elements of the presence of nature and also of a spiritual dimension of nature. It makes for a very unsettling space, sometimes. People wondering, "But where is this?! And actually, I think these spaces are places that you actually encounter. In the last four days, three days, I have been in the western part of Puerto Rico, visiting natural protected spaces, and going through these places, I'm like: "Wow, but this is my painting! This is exactly the place I aspire to represent." Where it's a space of where I think that humans can take back a more natural dimension into the world and take the proportion of things, the measure of things.

The Color of the Skin

GLORISABEL:

You're talking about this series that's being presented here about swamps, etc. You have a different color palette... Different, a different aesthetic from what has been established as Haitian art, which we are also talking about right now. I think your work breaks with everything that any viewer has seen before, like the painters who were there in the 40s, surrealism and all that. It is an aesthetic, as I say it again, very different. How...? What was your process to be able to define this color palette and other elements that we see in your work, which are quite distinctive

TESSA:

Well, for this last series of paintings, in particular, I think I was going for a mood. I wanted a specific mood, and it was for me about how I represent a time that you can't identify. Is it the dawn or is it dusk? Is it day or is it night, maybe? And so, also, from the beginning, I don't really think it was important to paint with "people colors." I mean it's important to mention it because sometimes it's a question that comes back in terms of correlating it with the depiction of Blackness. And for me, all of my characters are Black, and they don't need to have a flesh color to signify that. It's about more than just the skin, it's about more than just facial features, although that is a good indicator. But this is how my approach to colors has always been. Sometimes it's symbolic, but it's more about feeling and mood. And definitely, there's been a change recently when I left Haiti, where I felt... Definitely, my response, for example, I spent four years in the Netherlands, and it's a response to the environment there, too. But before anything else it was the need to be able to play with perception, and the perception of time in particular. Sometimes, I miss the bright colors, and there's a challenge for me in that. It's a very basic challenge for painters of how to reintroduce certain colors or certain... passion into the work. But that's for a future me to figure out.

The Vulnerability of Nudity

GLORISABEL:

How do you use nudity and monochromatic backgrounds to convey your messages and explore the themes of struggle and personal freedom with a postcolonial context?

TESSA:

Well, nakedness... In my paintings, mostly, the only naked character has been myself and my character “alter ego.” Most of the people I’ve painted were dressed. So, I feel that the nakedness is very... It is constrained to a certain idea of vulnerability to which I ascribe to myself, but not to other people. Just in terms of not wanting to speak about experiences that are not mine and not wanting to talk about the interiority of others, of which I know nothing about. So, at the same time, nakedness is... It’s almost like a carnival mask, because the character here, for example, their skin has a pattern and they have horns. So, the character is naked, but, not at the same time. Because it is vulnerable, but it is not unharmed... un-h-armed... It has weapons... of a different quality. I think, in this sense, nakedness is also about how unimportant it is, and it’s about how much you deceit to reveal at any given moment, and it’s not about the skin showing or body parts. And that's how I think about it. I’m sure there’s more to say. But yes, that’s my own understanding of it.

Art and Social Justice

GLORISABEL:

Last question... Art can be a powerful tool for social transformation and building a more inclusive community. How have you used your art to raise awareness, foster dialogue, and promote positive change in Haitian society, especially in terms of social justice and reconciliation?

TESSA:

To answer this question, I’m going to take it, maybe, out of this artistic practice that you see, where I think a lot about the objects that I make or the images that I create almost as a form of

therapy and investigation that are personal to me. And then, it's going to be about how I apply it in real life, in life that's outside of the canvas, outside of the studio. One of the things that are important to me is, actually, how do I share the things that I've learned with other young artists who maybe don't have the same privilege that I've had. Because right now, for example, there is no school of art in Haiti. So, how do I share resources? How do I shar or contribute to creating spaces where people can talk about their experiences? And I was lucky, after the earthquake, to get the support of Le Centre d'Art in Haiti, which is an institution that has existed for a long time, one of the largest collections of Haitian art, but also a space for learning. And they were always gracious at accepting initiatives from artists who want to propose the use of the space in one particular way or another. And also, one of the things that I'm currently working on, and that connects to the question of history, is that the books that are produced for children, the majority, are produced by this institution, which is a Christian institution, which was also founded by the French, also. So, the content of what you learn in history books often is very questionable, and it putting a very, actually, colonial perspective, even on the Haitian Revolution itself. And sometimes, in the description of the people, in who these people are, and in the qualities they have, all that "naïve Taino," who was "weak." You know, it's always about feebleness, and the actual revolution is almost like, "It happened by accident. It happened because the French Revolution was happening." So, I think one of the things I care a lot about is how to help change how we tell this history to very young children, and that's how I contribute to social change in the country.

GLORISABEL:

That is very important, the children. Right here in Puerto Rico, we also have the problem that Afro-descendants are also practically invisible in history books. So, even a year ago, an educational curriculum was being discussed. So, thank you for sharing your experiences. Now let's move on to the audience question session.

The Unexpected Farewell

PERSON 1:

How did leaving your country affected your art and methods?

TESSA:

Well, I think that, at the very first level, is that leaving affected me. There's...family histories, and the history of my family was that we stay. We are the people who stay. When I traveled to go to the Netherlands, it was just for one program, which was supposed to be a one-year program. But then, at one point, the president was assassinated and things turned for the worse. And my father, which was really shocking to me, told me: "Don't come back." So, I had to really rethink my whole identity and what it means now that I am not where I'm supposed to be. So, I question this idea of what it's supposed to mean. And this is the first way in which it has affected my work. I had to really think about what I was talking about, in fact. And I think one of the first tools I found was a little lullaby, when I arrived in the Netherlands. It was a song that my mother used to sing to me. But I found this version where they mention the Dutch people in the song. And the idea of the song is that, you know...? "Sleep, child... If you don't sleep, you know, bad things will happen to you." But then, at one point he says, "I went to the river and I went to the sea and I saw a Dutchman cutting down a tree." And as the Dutchman was cutting down the tree, the tree was cutting the Dutchman back. Somehow, this song took this kind of very meaningful signification in my life. In terms of justice, you know, that eventually comes. But also, this idea that, actually, the people who created this song, my ancestors, if you will, have knowledge of Dutchness. And have knowledge, probably, of all the people around the world. And so, this knowledge is also for me to find, and to make it mine, and to contribute to further down the line. What I have to say about Dutchness will be left as a legacy for future Haitian generations, but generations of people all over the world. This is how it has affected me, just in terms of what I think I can contribute, what I want to say. I've been, really, thinking about a Haitian map of the world. What does that mean? Because Haitians, and all of us who have migratory experiences, we build knowledge from these experiences. And in the beginning, I was getting information about what it's like to live in Pedernales as a Haitian in the Dominican Republic, via WhatsApp. Because in this one filmed a little video of interactions with a Dominican person. Or

this one in Chile is telling you that this is where you buy your food. And so, this built kind of world of Haitian experiences. And also, how you connect with, I don't know, someone from Burkina Faso who ended up in Chile with a Haitian person, too. So, the map also of how you connect with people from all over the world in these places around the world.

Thought-provoking Discomfort

PERSON 2:

My question is, how would you describe the world that you create in your art?

TESSA:

The world? Well... When people look at my work, I want them to feel a little bit unnerved, sometimes. I think that, maybe, a little uncomfortable. And why? Because I think that, in this discomfort, you have to challenge yourself to understanding what is it about this that is making me uncomfortable. What is it about this that connects maybe to experiences that have left an uncomfortable feeling with me? What is it, for example, at certain moments... It's about references also, you know? What is it about my culture that seems banal, but for another it connects with the devil or with all kinds of teachings that are uncomfortable? So, the spaces that I create, I definitely put something... spiritual... I use that word a lot, but it's a space of possibilities, and I like to think of it as the space in the corner of your eye, that you feel like, with any small step you take, you're going to go to another dimension. It's like a space that's superimposed on wherever you are. So, if I painted this classroom, then you would see another layer of the classroom. It's another way of seeing, and that's how I like to think of it.

Temporality of the Works

VICTOR:

Pertaining that space, you mentioned that, in some of your paintings, you try to blend what time of day it is, the sense of time... But also, I think that when I look at your paintings, particularly the more recent ones, I also understand that the sense of time in terms of past, present, and future is kind of blended. And I know it's an interior space or a parallel space, as you mentioned, to the physical spaces, but when are these spaces happening? I don't know if...

TESSA:

Yes, no... I would say the same thing. That there is no past, present or future. It's kind of connected to this idea that the Haitian Revolution is happening now. And I guess I can share another song with you that made this really apparent to me, for example. There was this moment of the Haitian Revolution that is very key; It was a Voodoo ceremony. And the leader of the ceremony is named Boukman. And there's a song, now, where you call for Boukman and tell him, "I'm calling your name, but I'm not trying to stop you from doing your mission." So, the mission may be something that has already happened. But calling on him now, you're saying: "Please CONTINUE doing what you're doing." It's that... It's all time happening at the same moment. And I like to think that it goes to a time beyond even the revolution. To the Taino people living there, and what was happening before at that time. Even in a geological timeline of land masses coming together and pushing and volcanoes and all this stuff that's happening now, and that has an effect on us right now.

The Creative Process

PERSON 3:

Hello. I just wanted to ask you if you have any particular creative process, or maybe, what do you do, when you run out of creativity, to recover from that? Do you have any advice for artists who, maybe, are going through it right now?

TESSA:

I think I run out of energy, sometimes, not necessarily of creativeness. I think, maybe earlier in my career, I would find an idea and say: “Oh, this is genial!” And then I would think, “Oh, my God! I’m never going to have such a good idea again.” But as time passes by, and I understand more and more of what I want to talk about, and I realize that it’s as infinite as this conversation that we’re having. It can continue forever. But I am someone who is very slow, in terms of productivity. I like to take my time. And also, I think I have a limited amount of energy that I can involve in any kind of action, in any kind of social interaction also. So, I work, really, in cycles of intense productivity, and then nothing. And my learning process has been to actually accept these moments of nothingness where you can get anxious. “Oh, nothing’s happening! Am I still an artist?” Whatever... But yes, I’ve learned to go beyond that, and just make it an integral part of the creative process. So, the bottom-line advice is that you have to sit down with that and be aware of what you’re feeling in your body also. And yes, continue to do what you feel.

Caribbean Responses to the Same Story

PERSON 4:

Hey, Tessa! You mentioned that you made this connection earlier between your work and these spaces that you've visited in the Southwest, recently. And I was wondering if, I mean, if you have already- I know you haven't spent that much time in Puerto Rico yet, but I was wondering if you could speak to the ways in which your time here has influenced your work or what it has made you think.

TESSA:

I mean, coming to Puerto Rico to start with was because I feel it’s important to have real embodied experiences of different places in the Caribbean. There is no connection, or what you know is limited. The vision that you have is limited. So, what I thought I knew about Puerto Rico was nothing, really, I knew nothing. And what I’m interested about is how similar histories can produce different ways of surviving, different ways of resistance and also how these ways are

happening right now. Because even though we are at different times in our developments as nation states or what have you, we're actually dealing with a lot of the same... It's the same fight, it's the same fight against, often, the same opponent, if you will... No matter what "opponent" might mean. And I think that, for now, I'm reckoning what Puerto Ricans themselves have to tell me about how a fight is, what it means, and the tools to do that. So, I'm not yet in a space of analyzing or seeing how to integrate it into something yet. I feel that I've not quite understood what I'm seeing just yet. And, actually, leaving someone, and I see... I visited the southwest, like, I'm coming in today from the southwest to here, to this space... So, connecting with the land in this manner also bringing me more information and more points of view to consider about what this experience is, truly. And I've been very lucky, so far, but I think it's also a question of choices. I have been able to visit Aruba, for example, different countries, speaking different languages and talking about different ways of being Caribbean. And I hope that, in my lifetime, maybe, I'll be able to synthesize something meaningful. But, so far, what I've found to be key are real encounters with others, and also, listening. And it's very practical, in the sense that I don't feel comfortable speaking Spanish, because then I listen to what people have to say. So, it's a work in progress. It's a work in progress. And I feel like it's coming and... For now, I'm just absorbing everything from literature to music, and how to move my body in Puerto Rico.

Finding Your Path from the Root

NADJAH:

Well, Tessa, I'm going to ask you something here, because we started this dialogue by reading a little bit about your biography, and I think it's impressive, isn't it, how you've been navigating the world of art... Being a woman, being Haitian... Being of African descent. So, I would like you to tell us a little about that process, about that navigation... How does one get to these places? How one plots one's own route as well, right? Because there's a route like the mainstream, right? But how do you choose your own route to get to those places, to those spaces? So, having such a young audience, where the majority are women, I would like you to tell us a little about that in your experience as an artist, how one goes looking for those spaces, defining what are the opportunities that one wants and the opportunities that one may not want.

TESSA:

Well, I guess this is where I talk a little bit about my family. There's a kind of intellectual tradition in the family where my great-grandfather was one of the first ethnologists on the island. And he's well known for being one of the first people who tried to encourage a certain return to Voodoo, specifically. So, there's this... I guess this ethos in the family about the importance of knowledge,that is from the root, if you will. So, I think different generations engage with it in different fashions. This one with writing, this one with music... And my path became art. And it happened quite beyond my predictions, because I thought I was going to be a doctor. What this creates is this willingness of, at least your family, to encourage you in your own research, in your own path. And I think that was the most important thing, because I didn't have that pressure of, "You need to know what you're doing right now." And it was more like, "We will support you." You know? "We will make it happen, somehow." So, I got time. I think one of the key things, at least in my history, is also that something similar happened with my mother, where she had a particular path. She was a secretary, an administrative assistant. And when she turned 32, 33, I was already an adult–not an adult–I was already an older kid. She decided to start writing herself. So, seeing her, as a woman, push for that, because she had to fight, she had to fight. She started writing poetry, and a lot of it was erotic. And there was a big pushback against that. So, I saw that, I saw her navigating space and also learning to stand for her voice. And that was a huge model for me of something that was possible. It is possible to start at any age. It's possible to make the space that, tale the space that you want, and it's also possible not to listen to what men have to say.

Beginnings in Painting

PERSON 5: My question is what inspired you and what did you start... What was your inspiration to start painting?

TESSA:

Wow! It was so bad at it! Yes, I did not receive a formal painting education. I went to... I was able to study in France, actually, at a university. But it was more theory, learning about history,

philosophy, law, and all that. And when it came to practical classes the teacher told us, “Oh! One plus one. What does that inspire in you?” And actually, painting happened because, at the time, it was the cheapest thing I could engage with. And also, because, yes, I became... Yes, I became stubborn. And actually, a lot of people told me that, maybe, I should let this go. So, something that’s happened over the years is I look at some of the first work that I did, and I say, “Wow! Nobody should see that.” But I think that... I think that what painting was for me is also something that I grew up around. History, painting books... So, I thought it must be easy, and then it wasn’t, but I held on to it. This is a weird way, but yes. I think that’s how it happened for me.

The Role of Error

NADJAH:

Are there any more questions? I have another one. I would like to know the role of error. How you handle error, right? As I heard you talking about, “Oh, this went wrong for me!” or “I didn’t like it! No one should see it!” I would like you to talk a little about your artistic practice, and where the error is and how you solve it.

TESSA:

Well, yes. There are a lot of errors, and also a lot of learning about how I handle it. Because, especially in the beginning, I discovered that I was, in fact, a kind of perfectionist... And how to get myself out of that. Because it’s like... How they teach you to paint within the lines, and you can’t go beyond that line. And I was always a very good student, so it was painstakingly taking time to fall inside those lines. So how do I get beyond that? But also, having it also not be about painting inside the line in a very material way. It’s not about if I’m painting inside borders or not, or how messy I’m being on the canvas. It's about the direction in which my ideas are going. And I think how I deal with error is with a lot of humor. And I think it actually influenced a lot how I started working. Where I would think, “Ha, ha, ha! That’s funny.” And so, I would play with it and let myself be the most ridiculous. So, how I dealt with the error was like: “No, this is a funny thing. This is something that, actually speaks to a big part of who I am as a person and how

Haitian society is… that kind of joy fullness." And when you go and walk down the street, and you see sign for advertisements, and it's all hand-painted... And many times, people don't know that the eye should be next to the other eye. So, one eye is down there, and the other is up here, but it makes it rich and beautiful. And if you see error in that, then you're missing the point of the old experience. And yes... Rarely, do I paint eyes that aren't symmetrical, but just knowing that it contributes to beauty, makes it feel good if it happened by accident.

NADJAH:

Cool. Anyone else? Any more questions? We have time for one more. Come on, Rafa.

Representing the Colony

RAFA:

Hello. I really love your art. I'm amazed. As soon as I get home, I'm going to look for everything and just and devour it. So, thank you. My question, you mentioned about the limits of the nation state, right? The obsession with the national state. As you probably know, you're in a country that's a colony right now... And where the desire to be a nation state, or something else, is central to many people's artistic practices... In activism, their schooling... So, my question is, how would you approach that in this context, in this specific context?

TESSA:

Well, I would address it, but I am not addressing it at all...

And I think that's a real thing. It's a conversation that I think needs to happen here. And probably, I don't know enough to be… And also, there's no position from which you give lessons to others. But I think that... I mean... We also have this. It's different in Haiti, because the story is different. But de facto, the one who decides for many of the things that happen in Haiti, is also

the United States. And if you follow the news that's happening now, you'll see the Secretary of State declaring this or that. And they say, "Ah, we think that... We want you...!" But what's happening is that we've already decided, and with different tools, what they decide is what happens. So, maybe, the positioning is different, but we're also still dealing with the same situations. So, I investigate that in my work. Mostly... I mean... I don't necessarily address it directly, if not indirectly, in terms of what are the possible futures or what these futures might look like. It is a work of imagination. Sometimes, people may feel, "Oh! This is disconnected from our immediate reality." But also, I think that the solution is not something that pops up spontaneously from one day to the next. So, thinking... Propositions is what I do. So, I think Puerto Rican artists also do this in different ways. And maybe, some of them fight for the nation-state, but that's everywhere the world. So, you have to investigate and see what else is happening right now. Maybe, those are the artists have more space to talk, but the population is creative and things are happening. Maybe, not in the visual arts, but I want to believe in music, and maybe, in theater, where these discussions are also taking place. Actually, because I've been, mostly, encountering artists and intellectuals, I thought that everybody felt the same.. As she said, yes, there is something to investigate, but maybe it is not the case. Maybe, I need to speak to more people that live ordinary lives, and maybe, they have a different position when it comes to the United States. But, so far, the artists I've met all said, "Yes, let's get rid of this."

NADJAH:

Well, I want to let you know that there is a luncheon outside... And I want to thank Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico for that snack. Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico is a non-profit organization that fights hunger. It began here in 2011, in our campus, in the middle of a strike. So, it is a luncheon made with a lot of love and a lot of revolution. I want us to give a round of applause to both Tessa and Gloria Isabel.