

Carlos Reyes: 18

October 27, 2023–March 10, 2024, Reference Gallery

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Sculpture is a primary medium for Carlos Reyes, whose elegant works undertake material investigations of infrastructure, architecture, and other designed objects that we encounter in our built environments.

Over the past decade, Reyes has employed a wide range of materials and techniques to recast both significant found objects and everyday items—from used treadmill belts to plastic egg cartons—into sculptural configurations that foreground visible traces of human activity. While his austere forms cite those of Minimalism, they refocus the movement’s emphasis on industrial finish to instead highlight the idiosyncratic results of embodied energy (like breath and touch) and the residues of elemental forces (like light and heat) exerted on objects and architectural elements over time.

Reyes’s first solo museum presentation brings together a selection of key works, including his 2018 installation *West Side Club* and the US debut of *PROMESA* (2021), which attest to the artist’s long-standing engagement with this form of material poetics. These major sculptures are accompanied by pieces from two other series that underscore Reyes’s commitment to producing manifest records of transitory events: a series of glass

sculptures indexes the artist’s breathing patterns, and in *18* (2023), Reyes’s newest body of work, terrazzo relief sculptures feature the impressions of blown-out tires from eighteen-wheeler trucks the artist collected from Puerto Rico’s freeways. The exhibition’s title, *18*, a subtle homage to these vehicles, was also selected by the artist for its “sculptural qualities” and the number’s associations with thresholds and transitions.

The works on view give vision to fleeting events and fugitive transferences of energy—convocations of bodies in the sauna of a New York bathhouse (*West Side Club*), the rolling rhythm of power outages (*PROMESA*), and the migratory routes of semi-trucks as evidenced by the blowouts in their tires (*18*) among them. In doing so, they index human activity within spaces and systems that are socially or politically produced and gesture toward the networks of circulation, use, and exchange that shape these movements.

Above:
PROMESA, 2021. Exhibition view: *PROMESA*, Soft Opening, London, 2021.
Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photo: Theo Christelis

Front cover:
West Side Club, 2018 (detail). Courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York



West Side Club, 2018. Exhibition view: *West Side Club*, Bodega (Derosia), New York, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York

West Side Club, 2018

In this installation, Reyes employs charged found material to present a haunted record of a New York bathhouse. The four slender monoliths that comprise the piece are made from planks of cedar wood that Reyes salvaged from the West Side Club, a now-defunct sauna in the Flatiron District that billed itself as “New York’s Private Social Relaxation Club for Gay and Bisexual men.”¹ The austere objects hover just above the floor, lending a spectral presence to rectilinear forms that appear taller than most people—but, in their proportions, still beckon comparison with a human body (if not also with the bodies of those who frequented the club).

The planks, which retain the scent of cedar and bear visible signs of wear (including marks left from transferred sweat and body oils of the club’s patrons), are also covered in hundreds of crudely etched inscriptions.

Among these minor vandalisms is an array of international place-names, presumably associated with the club’s clientele (Istanbul, London, India, Palermo, Trinidad, VNZLA [Venezuela], Portugal, Colombia, Cuba, and Sri Lanka, to name a few), as well as messages with sexual implications (“Any age, Any Race”) and names and initials of individuals and couples. In some areas, the artist has replaced the wooden panels with blue-green windowpane glass, which references the translucent paneling on doors or small windows typical of sauna design while also suggesting the exhibitionism and voyeurism inherent in a semi-public site of sexual encounters. Sometimes, the activities implied by Reyes’s chosen materials are also given form through surprising spatial interventions. In *West Side Club*’s first presentation, for example, the top few inches of each object penetrated a low drop ceiling.

PROMESA, 2021

Amid the pandemic, Reyes relocated to Puerto Rico. Setting up a studio in the US territory posed challenges, including finding reliable access to electricity amid frequent power outages. The artist has credited this experience with repositioning his interest in the “cosmetic” or visible aspects of a site’s infrastructure to “how those visible things are attached to deeper networks.”² This renewed understanding of infrastructure is evidenced in *PROMESA*.

An oversized pleated lampshade conjoins seven Ikea floor lamps positioned in a circle, and coiled lengths of cord from each light lead to a small circuit board with a Raspberry Pi computer. Using publicly available information on the number of customers without service from LUMA Energy, the private consortium that now serves as Puerto Rico’s primary electrical supplier, this computer governs the work’s hypnotic, pulsating lighting patterns. The

perceptible, irregular modulations in the brightness of each of the seven bulbs is a programmed expression of real-time data that the circuitry gathers from customer-reported power outages in each of the seven areas of Puerto Rico’s electrical grid.

The work’s title refers to the 2016 federal legislation known as the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, or *PROMESA*. A response to the territory’s debt crisis, the law handed oversight of the island’s critical infrastructure and expenditures to a financial control board that enacted a wide-ranging austerity plan and privatized formerly public utilities, including electricity.³ Reyes’s choice of title relates *PROMESA*’s entrancing yet unstable glow to the larger, less visible economic and legal forces that serve as backdrop and context for the rolling electric outages this sculpture records and transmutes.

18 # 1, 2023 18 # 2, 2023

Reyes’s most recent works, *18 # 1* and *# 2*, are made of cast terrazzo. Cement mixed with fragments of marble and glass, this durable material used in flooring and wall treatments was popularized by eighteenth-century Venetians and has a long history of architectural applications. As Reyes has observed, this history extends to Spanish colonial buildings in Puerto Rico as well as modern architecture. The stretch of zigzags formed by the wall-mounted reliefs at first appears as an architectural ornament. On closer inspection, their seemingly resolute surfaces bear irregular markings:

impressions from shredded, blown-out tires that Reyes began collecting from freeways in Puerto Rico earlier this year. Evoking movement, arrows, and pointy finials on fences (a common sight surrounding homes in Puerto Rico), their tessellating chevron forms subtly direct visitors through the exhibition space. Through varied, contrasting references to flooring, roads, fences, building materials, and trucks, these works allude to the transitory, sometimes invisible networks through which goods and services pass and are exchanged.



Night Club 8, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York

Night Club 1, Night Club 5, Night Club 6, Night Club 8, Night Club 9, all 2016 7269 (I), 2017

04

The changeable qualities of glass and the use of breath to give form to these evocatively shaped sculptures appeal to the artist's abiding interest in visual and material records of transitory events. Reyes cites a desire to "trace air and breath with an amorphous solid" as the prompt that informed the series *Night Club*.⁴ Blown in clear glass with what the artist describes as "basic inhale/exhale" patterns (the concavities produced by inhales are accentuated by light interventions with hand tools), these bulbous, curving forms, which Reyes considers "playful, sensuous, and possibly dangerous," also evoke functional objects like jugs, paddles,

and spoons—though usually at scales incommensurable with the things they reference.⁵

Some, like *Night Club 5* as well as *7269 (I)*, include metal elements, which introduced constriction and limitations to the shapes Reyes sketched through breath. In *7269 (I)*, a drum-like glass cylinder bulges around a metal shower drain that the artist salvaged from Melrose Spa (a long-running men's bathhouse in Los Angeles that was a notorious cruising site). Reyes's incorporation of an object recovered from the spa offers a prelude to themes that later emerge more substantively in *West Side Club*.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Carlos Reyes (b. 1977, Chicago, IL) lives and works in New York and Caguas, Puerto Rico. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Soft Opening, London (2021); Waldo, Maine (2020); Galerie Joseph Tang, Paris (2019); Bodega (Derosia), New York (2018); Vie d'Ange, Montreal (2018); White Flag Projects, St. Louis (2015); and Arcadia Missa, London (2015). Reyes has been featured in group exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Aspen Art Museum, Colorado; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Futura Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague; the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale; and the Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, among others. Reyes has received fellowships and residencies from Urban Glass, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and Denniston Hill. His work is in the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Carlos Reyes: 18 is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator.

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1 Profile description for the Instagram archive of West Side Club (@westsideclubnyc). The venue announced its permanent closure in an Instagram post dated May 29, 2021.
2 Carlos Reyes, conversation with the author, January 25, 2022.
3 A short analysis of the debt crisis (and subsequent austerity measures) as well as a primer on the colonial interventions behind it can be found here: Jorge Ruiz, "An Unfulfilled Promise: Colonialism, Austerity, and the Puerto Rican Debt Crisis," *Harvard Politics*, June 14, 2022, <https://harvardpolitics.com/unfulfilled-promise-2/>.
4 Carlos Reyes, email to the author, August 23, 2023.
5 Reyes, email to the author.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS



Curator Tour Selby Nimrod

Friday, November 3, 2023, 12:30–1:30 PM
In-person program

Gallery Talk Jackson Davidow

Thursday, December 7, 2023, 5:30–6:30 PM
In-person program

Graduate Student Talk: Soala Ajienka

Thursday, February 22, 2024, 5:30–6 PM
In-person program

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Baker, Shalanda. *Revolutionary Power: An Activist's Guide to the Energy Transition*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2021.

Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

Getsy, David. *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

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