



How Marcela Guerrero is Shaping the History and Genealogy of the Whitney

The DeMartini Family Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art shares how her career veered away from academia and into curation, the impact of exhibition choices on a museum's collection, and the lessons she's learned from Black curators who've come before her.

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- Alicia Menendez: Marcela Guerrero spent the first 23 years of her life in Puerto Rico before moving to Madison to earn her PhD in art history from the University of Wisconsin, then Houston, where she worked as a research coordinator at the International Center for the Arts of the Americas Museum of Fine Arts, then LA as a curatorial fellow at the Hammer Museum, and now at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where she was recently named the DeMartini Family Curator. Marcela shares what she has learned about the value of that nomadic life and how the decision she makes as a curator impact, not only the exhibits we see, but fundamentally change a museum's collection. Marcela, thank you so much for being here.
- Marcela Guerrero: Thank you, Alicia. Thank you for the invitation.
- Menendez: I'm always curious about the process by which one comes to their Latina identity, and I'm particularly interested for you as someone who grew up in Puerto Rico, what your experience was of realizing how other Americans thought of Puerto Rico.
- Guerrero: I think I've always been made aware of how illegible maybe I am, and I'll explain. I was born in Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, and lived there for my first 23 years of my life, but my parents are not from Puerto Rico. My dad is from Ecuador and my mom is from Argentina, and they met in Mississippi, so I've always been kind of feeling a little bit of an outsider. This jumble of cultural ethnic references, it's part of me. Then, I come to Wisconsin. Even though this is very clear to me, but it's not clear to anyone, and I don't think people knew what to do with myself, or with my ex. I saw their faces every time I spoke. You know when you can tell when people are not paying attention to what you're saying? That was a bit of a culture shock for me, and I'm sure for them as well.
- Menendez: Did you go to get your master's degree with the intention of becoming a curator?
- Guerrero: No. I was going to be a professor. I was going to go to grad school, get my PhD, and then teach at a university because that's what both my parents did. My dad was a professor at the University of Puerto Rico, and then my mom taught at a private university, English.
- Menendez: So, then what is the moment where it becomes clear to you that professorship is not the path you actually want to be in the museum?

Guerrero: Getting into grad school also meant that in order for me to live and pay rent, I had to be a teaching assistant, so a TA during the academic year, but that left me without any income during the summers. I think I was quite resourceful. I looked for every kind of paid internship that there was, and that exposed me to the Smithsonian Latino Center. I did one with ArtTable, which is a great organization still around, that supports women and non-binary, up-and-coming young people, and that exposed me to the gallery scene, to commercial galleries. And being exposed to other parts of the art world, of that ecosystem made me realize what I didn't want.

After that commercial gallery experience, I'm like, "Okay, this is not for me," but being around museums, I felt the excitement. It's like curators are constantly becoming experts on different topics every year, every two years, depending on the length of the exhibitions that they're planning, whereas academia felt so lonely, and maybe this sounds reductive, but that's how I felt it. I want to be accountable to other people and I want other people to be accountable to me, and that is the dynamic of a museum, of working with so many people in so many different departments.

Menendez: I love that. I think a lot about how in the early part of your career, there's so much emphasis on choosing the field you want to be in, and less on questions like what do you want your data look like? Do you want to have long-term deadlines or short-term deadlines? Those are the types of questions that actually give you clarity around what is it in art history? What is it in this big broad field that you specifically want to do?

Guerrero: Right.

Menendez: Marcela, looking at your trajectory from Houston to LA to New York, a big part of what this has required of you is a willingness to be a nomad, to go where the next big opportunity is. If I were only looking at your bio, if I were only reading your bio, what would I not know about the trade-offs and the sacrifices that ascension has entailed?

Guerrero: Yeah. I think something that the nomadic quality... Thank you for picking up on that because I think that also goes back to my parents not telling me, "Oh, you need to stay close to us," even though I wish I could live in Puerto Rico. "But you don't have to. Don't worry about us. You go do your thing," that was kind of an important unspoken, I think, belief in our family.

In the curatorial path, in my case until very recently, I had to move from museum to museum, from city to city to grow in my career because a promotion was just not going to happen because there are very few spots for people, but what that developed that I think it's such an asset that I think I bring to an institution that perhaps other people don't, especially those who have stayed in their cities and blah, blah in one city, often where they study, is that I bring big communities or a huge network.

I have my Smithsonian network. I have my Houston and Texas. That has grown to also San Antonio. I have my Hammer, LA people. It's given me such a broad perspective on the art field, on the whole ecosystem of art that I'm quite proud of that. Also, because I really one, have a willingness, I think, to expand that and connect other people, I think there's a little bit of a matchmaker in me also to also bring younger people. Though, I just recently heard an artist, Jaune Quick-to-See

Smith, a Native American artist, who talks about the future of me, and it's not only the future. Sure, younger people are the future, but the future of me. What does that mean? So, general, it's also to have that perspective in life.

Menendez: One of the reasons I wanted to speak with you, Marcela, is that you are thinking of museums and art in general through the larger lens of power. Who has power? How is power distributed and how can power be redistributed? I think some of the efforts you're making to diversify boards, efforts to make sure that the predominantly black and Latino security forces working in museums are properly compensated, that is all thinking in a much more holistic way about what it means to center our communities. So, here's what I want to know from you. Those are big, bold things. Were you always that bold? Where did that boldness come from?

While each of us, each of our listeners is not going to necessarily have that specific conversation as a curator, where we propose changes that may seem obvious to us but seem big and bold to the people that we're persuading, we will have our version of that conversation within our respective industries. What I'd love to learn from you is how you have had those conversations and how you've had them in a way that gets you to where it is you want to go.

Guerrero: That's so funny you say that because I feel like I've been so timid most of my life, and it wasn't really until I got to the Whitney that I felt just the mere fact of having someone be willing to listen to my ideas and to what I thought was a game changer. It's like, "Oh, you're interested in what I think? Okay. Let me tell you. Let me share with you." So, I don't know if I would describe it as bold.

Menendez: Okay, Marcela, I'm going to push back. You are still not giving yourself enough credit. Even if the ground was primed, even if people were willing to listen to you, things often get stalled out there. They're like, "Well, we listened. We did it." But to get from there to the change being realized, that's the real work.

Guerrero: Yeah. Sometimes I even think that it comes a little bit out of... This is the opposite of what you told me to do, but ignorance of the script has been written to an extent by other curators but not at the Whitney really in this particular field, but others have done it. So, what are some of those things that I can borrow from say, someone like Thelma Golden who did something similar for black art and black artists in the '80s and '90s? One of the best advices that she gave me was to work with artists of my generation.

I took that and I catalyzed that into my first exhibition, and this goes back to something we talked previously about the network of people. So, I met a bunch of artists and I met a lot of Latinx artists, and I continued conversations with them, so coming to the Whitney and doing the first exhibition, I thought, "I'm going to work with artists from my generation, artists with whom I've had a relationship from before. I'm going to consciously for my first show do something that I don't think has been done anywhere else, and that will make an impact because it's coming from the Whitney, so people will look and people pay attention, and there's this magnifying glass over it." So, I think I tapped into all of that knowing the power of exposure that my first show as a first Latina curator would have, and it resonated.

Menendez: I also love the idea though, others have done this for their communities, so there's something of a playbook, have the awareness to study that playbook, to ask the people who've done the work, how they've done it, and then begin to execute when and where you can.

Guerrero: Yeah, exactly. What are the things that I can borrow from that playbook from that? And that will make sense to the Whitney, and as a Museum of American Art, what exactly am I saying of artists who make work in the US but doesn't look like your stereotypical notion of what that is? So, what are these new ideas that have been here? Many of us have seen it. We know them. But the audience that comes to this museum has never been exposed to it.

Menendez: What did it mean for you to be able to center Puerto Rican voices at an institution like the Whitney?

Guerrero: It was definitely my most personal biographical exhibition, and I probably won't do another one wide to this extent, but I felt the need to do it. I wanted to represent. I think, Puerto Rico, maybe because I'm Puerto Rican, but that is such a particular case study for so many things, for colonialism, but also in this more recent timeframe, I guess, climate change, and what that represents when those two huge forces collide. So, I see it as a harbinger for other places, for other contexts. So, even though there's a specificity about Puerto Rico, I thought it would be a window and an opening for other people to see themselves by looking at Puerto Rican artists. And by that, that also meant Puerto Rican artists who live on the island, but also who live in the diaspora because the efforts after the hurricane wouldn't have happened if it were not for the diaspora.

In the absence of the federal and the local governments, the diaspora was there literally the next minute, the next day. The trust also that was involved in getting the artists and finding the artists. As opposed to my first show where I knew a couple of the artists and I was in fact even friends with some of the artists, I don't think I knew most of the artists of the 20 artists in my show. So, that was a huge long period of getting to know them, building their trust. I approached them as also visitors and viewers of the exhibition, so not just as like, "Oh, let me borrow your work and I'm going to put it in the museum," but, "What do you think of this idea? What do you think of how I'm contextualizing your work? It's going to be in the vicinity of these other artists." So, approaching them as their own viewers of their own work and of this exhibition was really important.

Anyway, that's a long-winded way of saying that it was very emotional. I think the day of the press release, I don't know how I held it together because every day before that, I cried every time I had to talk in internal meetings, and it did happen a couple of times in other interviews, but very proud of what we accomplished.

Menendez: Marcela, what did I miss?

Guerrero: I think part of being a curator that perhaps it's not that obvious to people because it's more of the outwardly and kind of external phase that we present, which is usually through our exhibitions, but there's so much also internally happening.

The biggest thing would be building the collection. I work in an institution that has a collection, so I can see in real time how exhibiting and showing the work of my particular case expertise, Latinx artists, how that impacts the collection, and that building the collection means that we can tell fuller narratives of American art. Even segments of our collection that are very well known like abstract expressionism or abstract painting in general, adding more voices, that amplifies, that makes it more complex, this narrative. It's not the hero story of Jackson Pollock anymore, but who else? What other artists came after and had the ability

to complexify that story. By having a work by Freddy Rodriguez, for example, it builds artists careers.

After no existe, after this show about Puerto Rican art that had 20 artists, we've been working on acquiring most, if not all of the artists. I've been working on this since January, so all of these artists will be represented in the collection of the museum, which adds to their... Especially for those emerging artists who haven't had that much exposure, it's almost like currency to have their name say, "My work is in the collection of the Whitney." Some artists are getting gallery shows which could lead to gallery representation, which means that artists don't have to teach, and also make their art at the same time, that perhaps they can live out of their art. It has huge implications. It snowballs. In the best of cases, it's a really beautiful story that one can do, and it's the power of being a curator at an institution of this size.

Menendez: Marcela, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Guerrero: Thank you, Alicia.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Trent Lightburn mixed this episode.

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