

The Artist's Wounded Heart

At the New Museum, Pepón Osorio's exhilarating assemblages and installations hold a mirror up to Latino communities and reflect his experiences in Puerto Rico and New York.



By **Holland Cotter**

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Pepón Osorio: My Beating Heart/Mi corazón latiente

NYT Critic's Pick

“My mother used to be a baker. My work consists of pouring out knowledge which I gained in the midst of my family. They are very creative people. They used to bake some incredible productions: fountains ... sugar ... dolls ... oceans.”

So said the Puerto Rican-born artist Pepón Osorio, in an interview in 1991, about the earliest sources of his work. That was the beginning of his understanding of how to “surprise people and be generous in making of things,” he said recently. And oceans — of objects, colors, ideas and emotions — are what you get in the drenching, exhilarating tsunami of a 30-year survey that fills the second floor of the New Museum in Manhattan.

The show, “Pepón Osorio: My Beating Heart/Mi corazón latiente,” his largest to date anywhere, isn’t a full career retrospective. It begins in 1993, by which time the artist had already been making significant work, and concludes with a project still in process. But it captures Osorio at formal high tide in five immersive, more-is-more environments that continue to make him, in a post-multiculturalist, identity-smoothing, melting-pot art world, an insistent anti-assimilationist voice.

And what a range that voice has: operatic, intimate, raucous, tender. Some of these installations convey, through layers of accumulated matter, the aural buzz of public places: shops, hospitals and classrooms. One piece, set in a prison, feels as hushed as a church confessional. Another suggests a home ripped through by violence — it looks like nighttime sirens sound.



“Badge of Honor” from 1995, a large-scale multimedia installation with assemblage, explores the toll of having a father in prison for both parties. Osorio built installations side by side, one simulating a prison cell, the other a boy’s bedroom, and projected videos of imprisoned fathers and their sons. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Osorio, who was born to a working-class family in San Juan, P.R., in 1955, remembers visual theatrics as part of his life from the start, beginning with his mother’s cakes, towering, multilayered, elaborately frosted affairs, which he helped to prepare. He remembered the flair with which people dressed; the displays of mass-produced goods, cheap and bright; the vivid ranks of Catholic-Yoruba saints. He would later recognize all this as art that didn’t call itself art, but that made him want to live an artist’s life.

Early on, too, he knew, like many of his compatriots, that he wanted to go to New York, where expansive opportunities were possible. In 1975, he moved there. He settled in the South Bronx, studied sociology at City University, and took a job as a case worker in the city’s Administration for Children’s Services, specifically in the prevention unit investigating child abuse and neglect.

This was hard, delicate, often heart-tearing work. Many of the children he encountered were Black or Latino, or both. If he hadn’t already known, as a dark-skinned Afro-Caribbean himself, about the cruelties of racism, he quickly learned.



A view of “My Beating Heart (Mi corazón latiente),” 2000, was inspired by Osorio’s health crisis. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

During this time, he also associated with a cluster of experimental artists, several of them Puerto Rican immigrants, and he began making art of his own. Among other things, he designed sets and props for performers, including the choreographer and dancer Merián Soto, who would become his wife. Some of these props, saturated in Caribbean popular culture, took on a sculptural life of their own. Galleries invited him to show. Grants and residencies came his way.

His growing reputation, though, was largely confined to Latino institutions, segregated from the mainstream art world. This changed when the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned him to create a big installation for its 1993 Biennial. That notoriously “political” show brought on a critical furor, and his piece, which is the earliest entry in the New Museum’s survey, caused a stir.

You can still see why. Titled “Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?),” it’s basically a stage or film set, roped off with strips of caution tape and showing the chaotic aftermath of a murder. In the center of what appears to be a city apartment, a female body lies under a bloodied sheet. Judging by the object-packed décor, the occupants are Puerto Rican. And among the carefully chosen items are dozens of videotapes of popular Hollywood films — “Fort Apache” is one — promoting the stereotype of Latinos as inherently violent. The real crime of the title, as he sees it, is the one of racial and ethnic assassination committed by the American mass media.



A view of “Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?),” 1993. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

From the Whitney experience, Osorio learned two things. One, that some viewers, including critics, saw only the violence in the piece, not the rebuke. And, two, that Latino audiences barely saw the work at all, accustomed as they were to feeling

unwelcomed by big museums. This last reality prompted the artist's decision to bring future work directly to them, where they lived.

The first opportunity came the following year when Real Art Ways in Hartford, Conn., asked him for a piece. He called it "No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop (En la barbería no se llora)," and installed it in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the city. Like the Whitney piece, it was politically pointed, but in this case the critique was directed at Latino culture itself, or an aspect of it: the phenomenon of machismo as played out in the traditionally homosocial (and suggestively homoerotic) environment of the barbershop.



A view of "No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop (En la barbería no se llora)," 1994. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Reconstituted at the New Museum, the piece is an eye-dazzler and mind-zapper. Car hubcaps decorate the walls; photos of Latino heroes (Che, Roberto Clemente, Ruben Blades, Osorio's father, Benjamin) stare down. At the same time, videos of men weeping are embedded in barber chair headrests, and a life-size, near-nude statue of a doleful San Lázaro, patron of healing, presides over all, buff of physique but blemished with sores.

This environment and others that followed were very much collaborative projects, developed with input from the communities they first appeared in. Such was the case with the 1995 “Badge of Honor,” originally installed in a storefront in a Latino section of Newark. The subject was, again, the concept of masculinity, positive and negative, in this case as played out in relationships between fathers and sons.



View of “Badge of Honor,” 1995, showing the teenage boy’s room. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

In Black and Latino communities where male incarceration rates were high, having a father in prison could be a “badge of honor” for boys. But what did this mean for both parties? To examine the question, Osorio built two stage-like installations side by side, one simulating a bare prison cell, the other the cluttered bedroom of a teenage boy. And he taped video interviews with two real people: an imprisoned father, Nelson Gonzalez, and his young son, then projected the videos in their respective spaces, so that the subjects seemed to be softly exchanging words of love, encouragement and regret through the wall that divides them. Beautiful.

Osorio has spoken of his childhood as “my center, the axis of my practice.” And that fact, along with his experience of working in child welfare, put him on the alert when he learned, in 2013, that two dozen public schools in Philadelphia, where he now lives, would be closed due to cuts in city funding. Most of the students in those schools were Black and Latino.

As a gesture of protest and mourning he organized a meeting of former students, along with their families and teachers, from one shuttered school, Fairhill Elementary, to stage a symbolic reconstitution of what was being lost. Together they rescued furniture, files, books, lockers and memorabilia, and assembled everything, embellished with drawings and written commentary, in a space in the nearby Tyler School of Art and Architecture, where Osorio teaches. Titled “ReForm” (2014-17), the result looks like a combo salvage site and treasure chest, a walk-in piece of pragmatic poetry.



“Convalence,” 2023, was inspired by Osorio’s own cancer treatment and his experiences in the health care system. Karsten Moran for The New York Times



A detail view of “Convalescence,” 2023, a self-portrait. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

The same may be said of the show’s latest piece, which is also its most immediately personal. Some five years ago, Osorio experienced a medical crisis — he was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer — and the work called “Convalescence,” dated 2023 but still in progress, is his response to that.

Unlike the self-contained installations, it’s in the form of discrete sculptures and assemblages. One is a wooden food cart — a Puerto Rican street “kiosko” — stocked with curative paraphernalia (pill vials, prayer cards, garlic bulbs). Another is a cluster of glass vessels, including liquor bottles and laboratory vials, arranged in the shape of Puerto Rico. The third is a free-standing nude male figure, arms spread, innards revealed, skin pierced with needles, and I.V. bags filled with liquid, hung, like a life vest, around his neck.

There’s a commentarial dimension to this image, about the marketing, in part through mystification, of contemporary health care. But, as always with this artist, it’s the material and imaginative generosity of the work that makes it memorable.

Osorio has always said that the primary source of his art is his own life. That’s true here in the vulnerable “Convalescence” figure, conceived as a self-portrait. And it’s

true in an older sculpture from which the show — organized by Margot Norton, chief curator, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and Bernardo Mosqueira, a curatorial fellow at the New Museum — takes its name.

That piece, “My Beating Heart (Mi corazón latiente),” from 2000, is in the form of a suspended six-foot-tall — Osorio’s height — paper piñata. Traditional piñatas are filled with treats and treasures that are released when the form is battered, slashed, destroyed. But no need to take a swing in this case. The gift is present, audible, in the air: the recorded sound, faint but steady, of the beat, the tidal rhythm, of the artist’s heart.

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Through Sept. 17, the New Museum, 235 Bowery, Lower Manhattan, newmuseum.org.

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic of The Times. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2009. More about Holland Cotter