



## **JOIRI MINAYA**

**Photos by Carlos Rodríguez**

Interview in her studio, as part of her residence with Smack Mellon, Dumbo, Brooklyn, NY - October 30, 2016

**Ana:** To start, this interview is going to go to the archives for future generations to learn about where you were at this point in your artistic career because we don't know where it is going to go, but we do know it's going to go big and far. So, we're thinking about 25 years from now looking back at your work and having other people knowing what you did but also how your work was in conversation with this legacy of Dominicana artists in New York and the way it's in conversation with other movements so thank you for your time. To start, I would love to know your history in New York. Were you born here? Did you arrive here?

**Joiri:** It's tricky because I was born here on purpose, for the documents, and I grew up in Dominican Republic. I came back here through a scholarship that Parsons and Altos de Chavón gave me. I went to the National School of Fine Arts in the D.R., and then Chavón. In Chavón, I got a scholarship to finish my undergrad at Parsons. That is how I came back to live here, but in the mean time I would travel a lot back and forth because my mom has a clothing store in the Dominican Republic and that is the business that raised our family. We would travel a lot with her, especially in the summer with no school. We would spend a lot of time in wholesale stores while she was picking the designs that she wanted to buy and then a lot of time packing in my grandma's apartment in Washington Heights. We grew up in all of that.

**Ana: When did your grandma arrive in New York?**

**Joiri:** I believe she arrived when she was like 54 and I was almost one, or something like. But she came before her sisters and little brother came here. People are mostly in Miami, but there is also a part here in New York. I am not sure about the date. My whole memory of my grandma has been here in New York; she moved to Miami five or seven years ago. Growing up she was always in New York I never knew her in the Dominican Republic other than visiting.

**Ana: When you would visit her in Washington Heights what was your sense of the place? The Heights, her neighborhood?**

**Joiri:** I don't know. I only started thinking about Washington Heights when I moved here. When I first came to Parsons, I spent a while in my cousin's place in Harlem. and then I went to another cousin's place in Washington Heights on 190<sup>th</sup> near Broadway. Then I ended up living in the same building where my grandma used to live but not the same apartment, the one below. That is when I first realized, going into the building, that this is a completely different experience. I remember when I first went into the building, the stair case was so small and I said, "This used to be huge when I was small." I was realizing I was small and started perceiving it differently. I don't know if I had a lot of impressions of the neighborhood itself until I lived there. I remember people talking about men walking in the street with low pants and how you are not supposed to do that. I remember how in summer there is people playing dominoes and drinking, just sitting and chatting outside. We were walking even though my mom always rented or usually rented a car and she would drive to New Jersey and Pennsylvania for the big outlet stores that had big discounts for her to buy en mass and send home. I think we parked and we were walking to the house and someone in my family said, "Yeah when it's really hot, the cockroaches come out." It was so horrible. I did not realize how horrible it was until I lived there and I was walking one day and remembered and now I am related to this space. That just speaks to how people in the D.R. think about people here.

**Ana: How many years ago did you move here?**

**Joiri:** Five or six years

**Ana: Do you feel like this is your home or do you feel this is a space to work and come back to Santo Domingo?**

**Joiri:** I think both those things, depending on the season. I am not sure, but the more time I spend here the more at home I feel. When I was growing up, I was always coming here. But then when I entered high school and I grew really attached to my friends and wanted to graduate in the Dominican Republic. So, there were various discussions about sending me here or not, but I think realistically that was never something that was really going to happen. It was just an idea, but then when I got this scholarship that was a really exciting moment because I was in college in New York. I also started learning about all of the various sides of New York and the landscape here. Living in Washington Heights and commuting for an hour I think everything is really real. Especially when I got to the classroom where

there is a majority of white folks that came from whatever state and their parents are paying their rent in downtown Manhattan or in Brooklyn.

**Ana: Have you connected at all with other Dominican artist that have gone to the Parsons program? Are most folks here in New York?**

**Joiri:** I think for a while they were, but now they are scattered. There is always a Chavón community here because they keep giving scholarships out, but I don't know the people that are there right now because I did not graduate with them. The people who came with me are in various places now.

**Ana: Can you describe your artistic community here? Where have you found home artistically?**

**Joiri:** I think it started in that small Dominican community of Chavoneros at Parsons. By now it has expanded to various Latino groups or people who discuss Latinidad, queerness, blackness. I would say those are my strongest communities.

**Ana: Do they overlap?**

**Joiri:** Yeah all the time, definitely. Another thing I think its super relevant to me being here and the things that I have gotten out of this is finding a language to unpack all of our racially loaded bullshit we carry around in the D.R

**Ana: Tell me about that.**

**Joiri:** Oh my god, that is going to be more than 45 minutes. [laughter]

**Ana: Is that part of what you are working on?**

**Joiri:** In part yeah. I haven't really unpacked that particular subject that much, but it is scattered in different instances. I think my awareness of race and gender come from growing up in the Dominican Republic as a woman of color -- whatever that means there. I think hair was definitely one very important point. I grew up going to the salon like any other Dominican Woman does from age cero until like 16 or 17. When I was ten my hair was relaxed for the first time. I went to art school when I was 14 or 15 and I think from there on I started being more critical of my hair texture and about being a slave to the hair salon. I stopped relaxing my hair and that was a mini revolution in my family, like it usually is. When I was 18 or 19, my mom would say "Its Mother's day; can you go to the salon at least once?" I did that once, I did it for her. Now it's all fine and they praise my hair texture.

**Ana: I want to know more about how you understand visual language, how you understand your materials and the questions you are asking.**

**Joiri:** I think it has to do with my arts education. In the national art school, the education is very traditional in all senses - from technique to conceptual approach. And although the history of visual arts in the D.R is loaded with criticality, it's not really taught in school. What I got there was more technique. I learned how to paint and draw realistically. At Altos de Chavón, I learned more about the critical aspect of creating work. They would ask you to form a thesis and ask you about what are you saying and trying to communicate and the scripts. Then when I went to Parsons I felt that I had taken enough creative and drawing

classes and didn't take any of that, which I sort of regret because here it's a different landscape and different discussions. I just went straight to performance installation and video and learning those languages. Parsons is very conceptual and theoretical and they would make you read and write a lot. They made us read and write more because we didn't do that at Chavón, so we had to make up for that. That definitely expanded the way that I thought about my work and I think ever since I graduated I am unpacking all of those technical decisions and conceptual decisions in my work. I always say that "Siboney" is one of the most successful pieces in terms of it being a video and a performance and having writing and being on a huge painting. It's really a piece that combines all of those things in such a way that they speak to each other. After I got all those tools, I navigate ideas and think about what would be the best tool to put this idea in an image form or experience form.

**Ana: What have been some of the questions you are asking with your work?**

**Joiri:** I made a transition from the work I did in D.R and then the work at Parsons and then the one I do now. I am also trying to connect to the work I did in Chavón because even from my thesis I was questioning a lot of things around stereotypes and gender roles and behavior and normativity. For my thesis there were portraits of my family and then another part was a series of pattern designs that were made into wallpaper or fabric. I wanted to talk about the idea of the modular, the thing that you repeat, and how that related to behavior and normativity in Dominican society. I wanted to contextualize that behavior within a series of larger patterns.

**Ana: Can you describe a piece that you made engaging that question?**

**Joiri:** The series of designs I did for my pieces in Chavón would take the form of wallpaper. You have these references to colonialism through both French style wallpaper and these other Baroque looking designs. In the Baroque designs, there was the image of a woman on the floor. In the French one you have two scenes forming a contrast, where there are women being servants to women, a little palm tree with a gallo - con el gallo on top I was also thinking of patriarchy and dictatorship.

**Ana: El gallo es un símbolo muy fuerte. Entonces do you work with the gallo a lot? Who are you in conversation with when you work? Who inspires you?**

**Joiri:** No, only in that design. Man that is a rough question. I am not clear at all times about who inspires me because we are so bombarded with so much information, especially today with technology. You see so much and read all these conversations and all this stuff that is happening and you are in this cloud.

**Ana: Interesting tell me more about that cloud, because I started doing creative work in a time before the internet was what it has become. So, literally, for me to be in conversation with other artists, I had to go to museum or to an artist talk or read journals or papers. I had to seek out those conversations and communities in a different way. So, what does it mean to you?**

**Joiri:** I am sure there are artists that have influenced my practice a lot. I just feel that I am trying to limit my exposure to Facebook and to the internet because I feel it loads my unconscious with information, but I am not conscious of it. I just feel loaded and then I am not clear about the things I am thinking about all the time. Maybe because I am thinking about all that, I am taking this position right now.

**Ana: When you sit down to create your work, what is your process?)**

**Joiri:** I call it deciphering what I am trying to say. I have to clarify my ideas for myself and in that process I have different ideas. I have learned that I just have to get it out and do whatever it is I am thinking about, otherwise the ideas will haunt me and be in the way so I have to make it. If it doesn't work, then maybe it's just a step to something bigger and I don't know it yet. I can talk about maybe the process of my most recent works. I think starting with "Siboney." I found this piece of fabric at Parsons when I was an undergrad, two or three months before graduating. The piece had red and blue patterns and I hung it in my studio and didn't know what to do with it. It was close to summer, and tropical prints were in fashion. I must have been wearing one of those shirts to a class and a professor said, "Ooh, tropical!" And I asked, "What does that mean?" It was the first moment that I was critical about this kind of imagery. I obviously had a thing with patterns before that, but I was also thinking about what we call tropical. Having had that experience and that pattern in my studio, I did not do much with it until later when I went to this residency called Scowhegan. There you spend two months there in this closed community with six other artists. I started taking photos of it. I scanned it. I deconstructed it on Photoshop. I separated every little leaf, every little flower and every little everything. I had the idea of making a video -- they had a green screen room there -- where I would be dancing in and out of the pattern interweaving with the flowers, but I don't have the technical skills to do that with the green screen. But I was trying to figure it out. At the time I was deconstructing this pattern I would go into the green screen room and dance and listen to this song called Siboney. I recorded myself dancing and that was also the first time I saw myself dancing on video. Then I had the idea "What does this mean to other people?" So, I brought in like nine or ten men individually and told them to dance to the beat of the song that they were listening to. I would leave them for five or ten minutes with the song on repeat and they would dance and I would see the video later. That piece didn't happen in the way I had first envisioned, but later I got the idea of calligraphy. You know how you write on the board whatever you want to memorize and how you learn how to write and all of that? Within all of this, I am thinking about all of these signifiers of tropical-ness. It is a concept that is constructed from the outside; it is not something we construct for ourselves. I was really clear on that. I wanted to make a piece that would be about that and I guess everything came together eventually and ended being that. That is a description of a process.

**Ana: What about this piece that's here in your studio?**

**Joiri:** I was going to say that. I was at Centro Leon and I had submitted my proposal and everything was going on. When I was working at Centro Leon I lived in Santiago for a month and a half and I would go there every day and I would

have this uniform. During the day I would be painting and shooting video and during the evenings I would be editing and researching. For part of that research I looked up "Dominican Women" on Google and that's when I got all these images. I never unpacked that during that piece at Centro de Leon. That definitely informed the aura of the piece, but it was an aspect I did not explore until a year and a half later. That was a whole other process. When I see a picture I drag it to a folder and I think about it later. I had other folders before that weren't from my "Dominican Women" Google search, but were women presenting themselves in



particular ways, through what I thought or think is a male gaze, yet also with various poses that are ambivalent because they felt in control and powerful in their pose, and yet also offering themselves to the outsider gaze. In exploring all that, I started cutting pieces up in Photoshop: the face and boobs and the ass and it ended up being parts of the body that were exposed and I did cut out a couple of jeans and shirts, but for the most part it ended up being body parts that were exposed. I started recombining them and made a series of postcards that I can show you. At the same time, I thought "How would this look on a scale that is relatable to me?" So, I printed some of them in human scale.

**Ana: And they are pixelated, too.**

**Joiri:** That was a nice accident because I wasn't thinking about how they

would get pixelated when I stretched them. I felt that was awesome because it references the same system where these images are distributed. They are often super low quality so they can open fast. A lot of those images are part of online catalogues for men that want to date Dominican women on their vacations. When I would click on these images I would read these profiles saying, "I am 25 and I want men such and such." It was all stuff that I was making at the time.

**Ana: Do you feel like that impacts how you walk through the world and people react to you?**

**Joiri:** I think a lot of these things come from me trying to unpack the way that I walk through the world and I think a lot of this awareness comes from when I moved here to New York City. Back in the Dominican Republic my concerns were different. The way I am perceived is more about my hair and the mulata figure that is projected on to me, and of course misogyny and how men see women as objects. I drag a lot of that here, but here it has been about how people can't tell where I am from based on my accent. They try to decipher it and I am seen as an exotic thing. Then I started thinking about what is all this imagination around exotic-ness and what does this mean? I googled "Dominican Women" in English thinking that the images that would be tagged in English spoke to an international audience or an outsider audience as opposed to ourselves, because we speak Spanish. All of these gestures have a lot to do with that idea of reflecting. I am not necessarily making the pattern or making the poses or making the movements of the dance, they don't necessarily come from my own choice, creatively speaking. This is all stuff I am taking in from culture that is thrown at me.

**Ana: In a way it's like you are a medium for these projections and you transform then through re imagination. That is nice.**

**Joiri:** Yeah. I am very clear that I what I am doing these days.

**Ana: Cybernetic medium.**

**Joiri:** I am just reflecting stuff.

**Ana: Let me ask, what does it mean for you to be Dominican? Does it mean anything to you? How do you feel about it?**

**Joiri:** It means a whole lot. I think there are a lot of Dominican women out there that I want to meet and talk to, because it's really exciting that everyone is being really critical of all these things. I think we carry a lot of stuff to unpack from colonial dictator times. I think there is a lot of people doing that work. It is interesting to be in conversation with all these people. I think its an annoyance to signify all of this exotic-ness to people who perceive you in whatever way as you walk through the world, but there are a lot of people who I guess are generally curious about our culture here and Dominicans have influenced a great deal here, especially in New York. To the point that we don't have to explain ourselves because people already understand that we are multidimensional beings and we are not these stereotypes. I guess as people get to know the Dominican population more, the stereotypes begin to disappear.

**Ana: What stereotypes?**

**Joiri:** The ones I'm interested in are these projections of exoticness. Of course being Dominican here carries a lot more stereotypes - from economic class, poverty to el tigueraje. There are also stereotypes that are initially positive, but they don't play out that way. I am thinking about the entertainer and the dancer or the stereotype of Dominicans as always alegre and all that stuff. They may be well intentioned,

and yet they become another superficial way to contain an identity in a way that you should not contain any identity.



**Ana: From your perspective what do you think is the role of art in social change? There are many perspectives on that, there are some people that say art it for craft and others say that art is for politics. What is your personal point of view?**

**Joiri:** I think there are so many roles that we have to take care of. I am interested in representation and voice and who has a voice to speak for whom. I feel that for a while people have been represented by other people – specifically minorities, people of color. In the D. R when I was doing “Siboney” in Santiago I attended this poetry night at Centro de Leon where someone introduced me to the painting I show in the video. It is a painting that was painted by José Vela Zanetti. It is an image of a mulata woman-dancing to the beat of some dark skinned man drumming. That is what the image depicts and it has quote from a poem by Manuel del Cabral. Through the painting I got to the poem and through the poem I got to this whole movement, the Poesia Negra. When I looked into it was mostly white Dominicans trying to represent black people and mulatos in a way that to them was validating, but was only perpetuating the same stereotypes. That is what I mean when I say representation is a big thing in the arts. To be able to speak for yourself and be able to undo the structures of power where people think they can validate others, or that they are the ones that need to validate. Awareness and criticality are things that I think are important in the arts. Not just the person doing the art, but that the art awakens those concerns in the viewer. You mention art for art’s sake. I wish I could take that position, but it is something very ideal. I think about that when I am walking from my place to the subway and some dude says something to me. I wish I could think of the universe, but you bring me back to this time and place where this body signifies this thing to you and then that becomes



really urgent to me to talk about that. I can't be like "oh! The stars" you know? So I think the idea of being neutral this whole thing of being neutral and universal is a privilege. I want to get there but I am not there because there are a lot of things that are urgent for me to unpack.

**Ana: What are the forms that you like your work in, both concretely and ideally. Is it important to show work in Dominican spaces here in New York? Where is it important to you to be in conversation with the public? Ideally, in your heart and what has also been your experience?**

**Joiri:** Ideally a variety of places. Places are loaded with their audience and their histories and

**Ana: So to be more specific, how does it feel for you to show your work at El Museo del Barrio, as opposed to Washington Heights? Do those two places carry the same meaning? Some people want to be del barrio and not be part of the commercial art world through the Whitney. And some others want to be in various places. My question is, who is it important for you to be talking to? When you say you want people to be critically engaged, who?**

**Joiri:** It is important to be talking to a variety of people. I feel it's really important to talk to my own community and the people I make this work for, or the people that have the same experiences that inform the work that I make. It is also important to insert yourself in this other context that has to do with power, because it is important to have a voice in those contexts. I am kind of just happy to show my work and go to my shows and have people talk to me about what they think and what about the work makes them think. I think in terms of non for profit and for profit, or community engaged or art institutions, I think there is potential for all of those places to activate the work in the way that I intend it to, originally. Of course I do want to be aware of context. "Siboney" was important for me to make it in the Dominican Republic. Here, when I have showed people the work in the form of video, they have asked me, "Oh would you do this again?" And, my answer is no. First, I don't want to copy myself. That is weird. And second, if I do that in this place, I have to be concerned with not becoming entertainment and not becoming a token to particular spaces. I do want to be aware of context - not show the work all around wherever, whenever - but it is important to show work and present it in different places while always remaining aware of the context and what that means to your work.

**Ana: That is very amazing because you work with so much repetition visually but temporally repetition is not interesting for you.**

**Joiri:** How so?

**Ana: The idea of copying yourself.**

**Joiri:** It's not that. I don't mind. But I have opinions about people that make a product out of their practice and it's also boring for me. Yeah sure I can do it again, that is a comfortable position and that is part of making a comfort out of this and figuring out that one thing that works and that works through un-accumulated form, so I am just repeating the same formula. I am making all of

them different and I can think about them individually But if someone tells me to do "Siboney" again for two months it wouldn't be "Siboney." I would accept it and then mess with it because I will not do the same thing again.

**Ana:** The artist Marina Abramovich is particularly critical of the consumption of art, but she bases her performance work on very disciplined repetition. She will sit for eight hours a day for forty days or walk in a particular pattern for one hundred days, right? The discipline that that requires is a very different discipline. Temporal is different than spatial discipline and just thinking where you find your strength and joy and complexity. If you make the same thing it does position your body in a different way because already your body is seen as something for consumption and opposed as Santo Domingo where humanity lives in a different way. Your thoughts brings to mind this idea of temporality and repetition being something that perhaps is more comfortable in video than in person.

**Joiri:** Right yeah, I have shown that video in a lot of places and I am not critical but re-performing the pieces doesn't seem like where it's at. I am still navigating the exposure of my body. It's not like I have just one way to go about it like, "and these are the works that I show here and these are the ones I show in the D.R." I am still figuring these things out but, I am aware of context and who the audience is and how it changes with the space.

**Ana:** Last question, what are you working on right now?)

**Joiri:** Right now I am trying to figure out these body suits

**Ana:** What are they made of?

**Joiri:** Fabric

**Ana:** Like lycra?

**Joiri:** Well the original one was this one which was made out of upholstery fabric which is super hard but this one is sort of a lycra sort of thing.

**Ana:** Do you stitch these yourself?

**Joiri:** I do, it's horrible.

**Ana:** What are you working on?

**Joiri:** So these are the posters I was mentioning before. They come from the same images that I did a google search on and from posters like this one and that one where. Initially I was recombining body parts and these two in particular are about concealing, denying that there is a lady in all of this flesh. I am also thinking about representations of the actual landscape versus representations of the landscape and how it is stylized and repeated for a pattern. From this gesture I wanted to see it three-dimensional basically. The first suit I made was this one.

**Ana:** Is there a name for this piece?

**Joiri:** Yeah it's called "Container."

**Ana:** Where did you draw inspiration from for these?

**Joiri:** It's a funny story. I was visiting my family in D.R and my mom she grew up in the country side in Barahona until she was nineteen or something. I think she has an aversion to nature. I am the opposite. I grew up in the city, so I go on hikes and to the countryside. I am there visiting and she says "I found this natural hotel that you will probably love." When we got there – she is into resorts that are all inclusive, but I hate all-inclusive because of all the craziness. She found this place and when we got there it was this natural hotel; they had deviated part of the river, using concrete, to this pool that they built out of stone. I was so interested on about the purpose of nature and the representations of it, they have this space that is supposedly all natural, but it has a concrete floor. The photo makes it look like a strange natural place. I was interested in the representation of nature as a pattern versus the representation of nature as it exists. I think these are the first photos that I was not as critical of certain things and then this one is more. I took this one here. I was thinking about mimicry and camouflage. These suits exist for taking photos that are staged. I did a performance with them last summer and Carlos Rodríguez helped me photograph them. It was a performance event in a sculpture park. Being in a live performance, I wanted to activate other things about the body suits. So what I did was that I had four different performers and they had these body suits on, and they had had instructions on what poses to do and what to do with the audience for the length of an audio track. The audio track is a reading of the scripts that I had prepared. When the audio track ended they were allowed to take parts of the suits and look around and stretch. The body suit constrains your posture and defines it, but I still wanted to break that moment of suspension and entertainment and have a moment where people will see the person underneath and also realize that it is all shifts, and it is all being performed for you. They draw attention to the underlying assumptions surrounding consumption and our performance of identity.

