

Rodés, Andrea. "Being Afro-Latino is being between two places," *AL DÍA*, 22 February 2018.



"Being Afro-Latino is being between two places"

By Andrea Rodés



AL DIA spoke with the artist William Villalongo about how the art and history of this country have defined the current Afro-Latino identity. Photo: AL DIA NEWS

William Villalongo is a co-curator of Black Pulp, an exhibition in Philadelphia that mixes art and historical archives to describe the struggle of black people to live with full rights.

Black women of sensual forms, primitive masks, dense and jungle vegetation... **William Villalongo** has never been in Puerto Rico, or in the African jungle, but since childhood he likes to imagine the landscape in which his ancestors grew. Born in 1975 in Hollywood (Florida), of Puerto Rican father and African-American mother, Villalongo is today one of the most prominent Afro-Latin artists of the New York scene. His interest in exploring his African-American roots and identity through art has led him to exhibit throughout the country and his work now belongs to collections of several museums, including the Whitney Museum and the Museo del Barrio, in New York, the Princeton University Art Museum and the Denver Art Museum.

For Villalongo - raised in Bridgeton, N.J, and resident in Brooklyn, NY - one of the main themes of his work is to explore the challenges of the African-American community in the US. You can see this in his most recent paintings: a series of acrylic paintings where the author creates strange geometric shapes of floral motifs in black and white from which human forms emerge: large brown eyes, thick lips, hands raised as a sign of peace, baseball caps, sweatshirts. **Camouflaged elements that serve Villalongo to reflect on the "invisibility" of blacks in American society**, as well as to denounce the police brutality against African-Americans in the US, "an issue that has been repeated in the last two years," explains the artist in an interview with AL DIA News.

Art against prejudice

Villalongo is not only dedicated to creating. For a few years, he has been a professor at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York, and has committed himself to studying in depth the phenomenon "Black Pulp", that is, the set of artistic manifestations, illustrations, historical documents and other forms of expression appeared in mass media and magazines that are testimonies of the black and afro-latino history of the US, as he explains.

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His knowledge of the "Black Pulp" is what has brought him to Philadelphia, where the **Black Pulp! Exhibition** - co-curated by him along with the African-American artist Thomas Gibson - which **can be visited at the African-American Museum in the city until April 29.**

"A hundred years ago, the media of this country dragged big racial stereotypes", says Villalongo to explain one of the objectives of the show: to bring to light these racial prejudices that black artists and illustrators have tried to fight throughout history. Among the most outstanding artists that are exposed are Derrick Adams, Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker ... "artists who work with illustration and comics to reflect on racial prejudice", insists Villalongo.

"We discovered that the black publishing world gives off a surprising energy. They are artists who try to change the general perception of people about blacks," says the artist. For example, in the 1920s it was very normal to caricature black people in publications. "In the exhibition, we reveal these media and then put them in context with the art and literature of the moment," he explains.

The exhibition **puts documents and historical archives in dialogue with contemporary art, so that together they explore the creative and strategic use of printed media.** This ranges from magazines, novels, posters and short-run comics to impressions of traditional and experimental fine arts that, together with other mediums in view, **challenge racist narratives and preconceived notions of black experience.**

The Afro-Latino essence

Among the artists selected for the show are several of **Afro-Latin descents, such as Villalongo. One of them is the Afro-Dominican Lucia Hierro**, born in New York in 1987. Taking the New Yorker as a subject and material, the visual montages of Hierro are extracted from Instagram or inspired by the pages of the well-known magazine of her city. The artist defines her montages as "an ode to the mascot of the magazine: the dandy". Art critics interpret Hierro's work as **an attempt to connect her "Dominicanness"** with the symbol par excellence of the style and intellectuality of New York City.

There is also **Kenny Rivero, an Afro-Dominican artist, born in 1981**, who exhibits his imaginary comic "Gotham City Screams". Mixing oil painting with graphic illustration techniques, Rivero creates a comic superhero, wearing a mask and communicating through dialogue balloons, with a specific goal: "to build stories and identities that I have been conditioned to understand as the absolute truth"

For Villalongo, **his afrolatinness is a hot topic.** Although his father is Puerto Rican, **Villalongo does not speak Spanish.** His parents separated when he was little and he and his older sisters grew up with his mother's family, of African-American descent, in Bridgeton, southern New Jersey. "I grew up speaking in English, but the Latino culture prevailed around me," recalls Villalongo. In fact, his paternal grandparents lived in front and "my beans with rice were never lacking," he jokes. Last year he was about to travel to Puerto Rico for the first time, but Hurricane Maria ruined his plans. "There will be another time," he says. Villalongo doesn't lose hope of visiting the island where his father was born - and where part of his roots are - even though he cannot express himself in his language. **"Being Afro-Latino goes beyond the language," he says, convinced.** "That I do not speak Spanish does not mean that my family is not imbued with Latino culture," he adds.

The dream island

He knows that his father's relatives were farmers in Puerto Rico. His mother's family, however, came to New Jersey decades ago, from Georgia, in the south.

"All this is reflected in my work, in landscapes, for example. Since childhood you idealize the island, I have imaginary landscapes in my head", Villalongo comments to explain the meaning of his works.

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Similarly the stories they told in his family were curdling in his mind. "I grew up in the city, but my figures and bodies are in nature, in the forest," he says.

In his previous series, called "Nymphaeas", Villalongo creates feminine figures that imitate the nymphs of classical antiquity: symbols of divine beauty according to the history of Western art, which he transforms into black women of voluptuous bodies. He admits that he likes to distort, manipulate the ideas that have prevailed in the history of Western art, written by whites.

"In the West we have become accustomed to taking African art objects and placing them on the side of the sofa to decorate, although that is not their purpose. **We are obsessed with fitting a narrative, a story,**" he says. He decided to do the same: his black nymphs have no head, but geometric shapes, as Picasso used to do.

The invisibility of the black man

In his last works, Villalongo works the idea of the invisibility of the black man. His paintings are a way of denouncing the **episodes of police violence against blacks that occurred in Missouri and other US cities between 2014 and 2015**. These incidents, he says, made him think a lot about the concept of presence vs. absence, on the "way to change forms, just as we change emotions and moods," he says.

His art of racial denunciation is especially significant now, under Trump's mandate, an openly racist president, especially with Latinos. "Trump is very focused on his anti-immigration discourse," says Villalongo. Although he does not speak Spanish well and it is difficult to label him at first glance as "Hispanic", he admits that his Spanish surname has an important weight in his life and in how it is perceived by American society. **"Whether it's my last name or my appearance [dark skin], I always end up being an Afro-Latte. And being Afro-Latino is a hybrid concept, it means being in an intermediate space sometimes"**. This connection between African-American and Latino, between the Caribbean and the US, has always existed in the history of this country, according to Villalongo.

Four years ago, Villalongo was already invited to El Museo del Barrio in New York as a representative of the Afro-Latino community. **"The debate about Afro-Latinity is increasingly interesting for me, because people start remembering their roots, even if it's not the language that unites us all,"** he says. "We are very different identities, united by deeper ties. Being Latino in Texas is not the same as in California or Florida, or in cities like New York, where identities mix and dissolve way more. "It's a multicolored label," he says.

Villalongo does not see unfavorably the American desire to be classified as Afro-Latino, African-American, white, Asian, whatever. **"In America, embracing diversity is something positive,"** he says. "Everyone can feel proud of where he is. It's the beauty of this country," he says. And this is the goal of Black Pulp!: to emphasize that in the US blacks have had to carry out a struggle to be considered complete persons, people with full rights. **"It's all there, documented in those historical archives and illustrations: the struggle to be a full person, a person with full rights."**

And he concludes: "It is true that when Obama was president, the United States was a more progressive country and now, with Trump, not so much. But if one contemplates the scenario with a wider scope, everything is more complicated. This exhibition is important because it explains the history of our country, it is a reminder of why the US it is how it is, today".

Black Pulp! Exhibition can be visited at the African-American Museum in Philadelphia (70, Arch Street) until April 29.