*El Viejo Griot (The Elder Storyteller)*

Let me introduce you to *El Viejo Griot*, a 2 and a half metres tall artwork and mythical orator derived from the town of Loíza's annual festivities Fiestas del Santiago Apóstol, the Festival of Saint James the Apostle. A griot is an elder Afro-Indigenous musician, oral historian, and keeper of local traditions, so ‘El Viejo Griot*’* means ‘the elder storyteller’ in English.

‘El Viejo’ glides out of the wall behind it, down onto the white shore of a gallery plinth in a small weatherbeaten fishing boat. From head-on, only the bow juts out, pointing forward, and its name, also ‘El Viejo Griot’, is painted in white letters on either side of its once red but now rust-brown hull. The prow of the boat nudges five lines of thick plaited marine rope, bubble wrap and shiny plastic tarp in shades of turquoise, navy blue and sea-foam white. They curve around the prow in rippled gradients of blue on the ground which is represented in the earthy brown tones of hessian.

The figure, ‘El Viejo’, rides high atop the boat, its head referenced by a rectangular brown cardboard box tilted diagonally upwards on its shortest side. A brass post-horn with a wide funnel-shaped mouthpiece bursts from the box, heralding its own arrival. A rounded red shape within the instrument’s throat symbolises sound and music. Colourful, ruffled hair frames the top of the cardboard body in cascades formed from strips of wood painted in red-and-white polka-dots and black; and draped towelling fabric and tarps in tones of purple, green and turquoise - an abundance of hair that suggests a masquerade costume. Nestled within this are two long animal horns and two over-sized twig brooms, their tendrils bound together by fine wire. Below the hair, two long wooden oars descend in diagonal lines from the boat, with the blades resting on the ground.

‘El Viejo’ carries the past on its cargo deck which is here represented by the flat white wall. Hessian sacks in laid-back reggae colours - green, yellow, beige and red – are stacked behind the storyteller in a tightly packed pyramid that stretches over five metres wide and reaches a five-sack-high top of two and a half metres. Sitting atop the stack is a grey soft felt hat with a black band. Attached to its front is a circular medallion with a mirrored centre encircled by thin rope in shades of pink, brown, red and green held together with dressmakers’ pins. Each outer step of the pyramid of sacks is weighed down by a weathered wooden buoy, painted in faded shades of sky blue, red, grey and black and connected by fishing rope. Each sack is stuffed to a full plumpness and bears a different date printed in black numbers referring to significant Puerto Rican events such as 1511, the year of the Taíno Rebellion, 1797, the failed British invasion, 1898, the United States invasion, 1952, the Commonwealth declaration, and 2017, Hurricane Maria. ‘El Viejo’ transports sacks of memories. ‘El Viejo’ knows every date, knows every tale off by heart, its post-horn voice proclaims and sings of the island’s history of slavery and Black victories over European and US colonialism.

A set of life-sized hands, two mismatched black heavy-duty gloves which have been painted with red markings to appear visually similar, hang over either side of the pyramid stack around three sacks up from the ground. With painted polka dot hessian sleeves, the hands rest on two conga drums, poised to tap. The drumheads are angled towards us. These rhythm keepers for the sea-faring musician-come-storyteller echo the thunderous wind and lightning of the island’s hurricanes. In fact, as with many of his works, Lind-Ramos collected many of the materials in this piece after Hurricane Maria in 2017 and combined them with items gifted by friends and neighbours. Like the sacks, the found objects in this sculpture bear the collaborative histories and memories built by Puerto Rican communities.

*Ambulancia (2020) (Ambulance (2020))*

*Ambulancia (2020)* comes to us at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hospital beds are full. Masks are makeshift, handmade. Information is still scant. Assembled out of old car parts, old bed parts, tree bark, tubes, and a wheelbarrow, it is parked in the gallery on a white rectangular floor plinth 4m x 2.5m, part creature, part cart.

At around 3m tall, the looming figure of *Ambulancia* rides a black wheelbarrow that forms its extended back half. A little over 3m wide, its side view from its head to its elongated carriage is seen through the large window looking into the gallery from the entrance lobby, drawing visitors into the intriguing space. *Ambulancia* carries many loads, administering care in its community. A stuffed hessian sack, dotted in painted plant-green spots is draped low over a wooden bracket, forming a lap for the figure as well as an enlarged noseguard for the wheelbarrow. This protects its front mono-wheel and extends backwards past the wheelbarrow’s own handles to form elongated extensions which end in two pine bed legs, increasing the wheelbarrow’s capacity to hold and transport.

Atop the figure’s head is a large emergency siren light in a horizontal orange plastic casing. More often found flashing on top of emergency vehicles, here the light is permanently unlit and silenced, fastened to a short wooden base. From face-on the round face of the figure is a white megaphone, again silenced. A neck and beginnings of a torso are formed from a pair of shiny, crumpled black trousers. Pinned to the top of its chest, which is a partially cracked car brake light, is a mesh metallic sack hanging like a limp COVID-19 facemask. It resembles the grey beak of a bird or an oversized respirator. A transparent PVC tube exits the bottom of the mesh bag and runs over the left shoulder, hiding within the structure of the back before emerging as a thicker tube from the other shoulder and continuing downwards to disappear under the front central structure. The tubes are like thicker versions of those you might expect from a medical setting in the form of catheters, breathing tubes and IV drips, transporting fluids or oxygen.

Four chunky car bumpers in alternating violet-blue and maroon-red are bolted vertically together, with their curves forming the metallic bulk of the figure’s broad shoulders. The bottom edges of the two outermost bumpers are dressed in a lightly sheened purple fabric, once used to line the interior of a car. They form an off-the-shoulder sleeve that ends in a PVC tube resting on the steering wheel on one side and on the other, a rounded, fingerless right hand formed from a silent maraca, here speckled in identical plant-green spots to the sack it’s resting on, as if afflicted by a rash. It lies still, holding in its serpentine rattle.

*Ambulancia* is predominantly blue and purple. Blue, the colour of coldness, hospitals. Purple, the colour of mourning in Puerto Rico, of sickness. A pale blue bedsheet hugs the figure’s shoulders and sweeps over its right side turning into a billowing pleated right sleeve ending in a blue latex glove resting on the hessian sack lap of the figure. This blue recalls frontline nurse's uniforms - a profession practised by Lind-Ramos’ own daughters. A grey PVC ribbed tube stretches from behind the bedsheet’s elbow like a ventilation duct and latches onto the bottom of the hessian sacking that forms the lap. These points of contact secure the load in place but also bring a sense of unity in this shared goal of transporting, delivering, and finding healing. Almost hidden behind the sack on the right is a large white plastic bottle of Clorox disinfectant, a nod to the artist’s obsession with cleaning products during the early weeks of lockdown.

The figure drives itself with a steering wheel of sorts, a semi-circular disc formed from a broken black electrical fan base embedded into the top of a triangular structure - a palm trunk, a little over a metre long, framed between two purplish-white-painted planks, edged in brown rope, that taper to a spiked blue point, grinding into the floor plinth. Lying along the top of the encased trunk, a rusty shovel is screwed vertically along the length of the steering wheel structure, its blade directed at the ground. *Ambulancia* is ready to plough itself and its load forward, at a plodding pace, shovelling a path ahead in uncertain times.

The skeletal carcasses of four unupholstered black metal chairs are stacked vertically on top of each other, in the tray of the wheelbarrow against the figure’s back - their curved, ornate legs jutting out from left to right. The bare skeleton of their frames is in stark contrast to the swathes of textile materials behind them. Balanced along the wheelbarrow’s extended wooden frame on the left side is the naked mesh of springs from inside a double mattress, standing upright on its longest side - so large it overhangs the wheelbarrow’s handles. Regimented rows and columns of spiralled bed springs offer fragmented views of passing gallery visitors.

The ghosts of beds exist broken up across the sculpture. On the opposite side, the wooden frame is wrapped in a padded sleeping mat gifted to Lind-Ramos. The story goes that a woman in his community had two sick children during the pandemic, but the hospital at the time didn’t have enough beds or bedding. So, this woman carried her own sleeping mat to the hospital and later gifted it to Lind-Ramos to use in his works. A black car bumper is secured on top in three places by thin grey wire, doubled and even triple wrapped in places, and gives the suggestion of a motorbike’s sleek seat for more passengers.

Two well-worn paint-splattered brown leather boots are attached to the legs of the wheelbarrow's undercarriage at the very back and strain forward on the ground, as if they’re pushing this mighty cart. Ribbons of materials found across the sculpture in purple, grey and blue are wrapped round the wheelbarrow ankles as if *Ambulancia* is wearing stripy socks. These sturdy size 13 boots were worn regularly by the artist in his studio and travelled with him to New York City in 2020, where, as he was installing his artworks in a gallery, the city went into lockdown. These are worker boots, tough, perfect for carrying heavy items, walking long distances, and of course making art. The left boot is bent in forward motion, caught in the act of pushing itself, one laboured step at a time. *Ambulancia*, the ultimate frontline worker, is a creature cobbled together in an emergency, for an emergency.

*Centinela de la luna negra (Sentinel of the black moon)*

One evening a black moon crests the inky blue sky like a comet, rising above constellations of stars. By this dark light, a woman draped in emerald glides in a forest green kayak across a circle of water as still as glass. She is seated, her body hessian-brown, her face peering out into the distance, vigilant in the night.

The artwork, over two and a half metres tall, is mainly supported by a semi-concealed iron pole in the centre and white plastic table-legs which anchor different parts of the woman’s upper body as well as a wavy backdrop of the inky night sky and moon above her head. A series of discreet white table leg poles support her lower body within the boat.

Her bright green kayak has been cut in half so just the prow remains. The story goes that a prominent activist in Puerto Rico gifted the kayak to Lind-Ramos as it was out of use. This activist runs an organisation next to the mangrove forest, providing kayaks to locals, who then give tours of the great trees and lagoons. This way, tourists can experience the beauty of the mangroves without damaging the beauty of the environment.

Let me tell you a story about a woman who guards the mangroves, inspired by this activist and countless others. She is a serene presence in green with two white horns on either side of her head. A hessian headdress reaches just below her shoulders. It’s painted in a pale sage green that complements her floor-length tarpaulin cape painted in a camouflage pattern. The cape sweeps down from her left shoulder as you face her in a dramatic flourish, leaving her back, a blue barrel cut lengthways, exposed. She blends perfectly with the forest just like her Afro-Indigenous ancestors who, newly freed from slavery in the Caribbean, travelled to Puerto Rico and hid from colonisers in the depth of the trees.

Her round face is a large metal cooking pot tipped on its side, its circular hole facing us. It’s balanced on top of an upside-down grey iron stove that serves as a neck. Women from Puerto Rican communities would use these kinds of pots to make charcoal from mangrove wood. Here, the pot carries a dozen dry branches with round ends that spill over the rim. Originally found near the mangrove forest, they are all around the same size (around 35cm long) and thickness in similar shades of light brown. Embedded within the little draft hole of the stove is a red pincushion. Its red is the colour of fire, of flames, of a beating heart.

A leaf green pendant the size of a fist hangs from a hessian V-neck collar between two stuffed sack breasts. The pendant, a gleaming jewel, is only the inside of a paint-tin lid daubed in paint but on her looks regal. Her stuffed hessian sack arms are short and demurely held by her side, encased within transparent PVC bags containing clusters of burnt black charcoal-like lumps in the place of her hands. Her waist is a coil of wheat-coloured rope, impossibly thin.

There is no delineation of legs, just one seamless stuffed hessian sack that takes up all the space in the kayak. It gives the impression that she’s sitting down though her upright posture is alert.

On the left side of the kayak are two curved sections of a fallen tree, a little over a metre long, arranged one slightly above the other. One time, Hurricane Irma blew these sections of trunk onto Lind-Ramos’ studio roof. Then Hurricane Maria came along and knocked them down into his yard, freeing them for Lind-Ramos to use. He treated the shards in lacquer in the masquerade traditions of his craftspeople ancestors, adding a line of mauve paint along their top edges and assembling them to hug the curve of the side of the kayak. Their cracked tips arranged together mimic the claws of crabs.

On the right side of the kayak are the woman’s agricultural tools. A shovel for digging earth and planting new life and an axe for chopping and defence. Their long wooden handles are leaning against her side, almost reaching her waist, and their ends are connected by barely perceptible thin wires to the back of her curved body. They are within her reach, ready to protect the mangrove. The kayak is elevated on a square white floor plinth, and the prow of the boat along with one of the crab-claw tree sections, rests on a circular glass tabletop, like a perfect droplet of still water.

A wavy blue shape around 1 metre long rises above the woman’s head like the trail of a comet and forms a nocturnal backdrop that crowns her head in an oversized halo. This is made of a bright blue tarpaulin distributed in the wake of Hurricane Maria by FEMA, (Federal Emergency Management Agency), referencing Puerto Rico’s ongoing colonial relationship with the United States. Rounded metal pin heads pushed into the tarp represent a smattering of stars, and the black moon itself, referenced in the title of the work, a former saucepan stained and burned from use, peaks in the inky sky.

When you move behind the sculpture, a lacquered coconut tree branch, a little over a metre long, with a voluptuous bend like the roots of the mangrove trees that grow above the waterline is revealed, extending from the middle of the woman’s curved back all the way to the floor plinth.

This lone slender leg is attached to her amphibious foot, a black webbed plastic flipper. The heel is raised off the ground as if it were a stiletto, mid-striding, simultaneously pushing her boat and herself off land into the circle of water. The brand of the flipper is ‘Guardian’, a fitting title for this female sentinel of the night. She marches under the cover of the black moon powered forward by her own strength, offering protection and knowledge just like the mangroves.

*Centinelas de la luna nueva (Sentinels of the new moon)*

A quintet of masked watchwomen stand vigil across land and sea in a protective circle. Conjured to life from mangrove branches, items used for fishing or cooking, cardboard, metal and hessian sacks, they are an ancient henge of ancestors, the women who have laboured for the mangrove’s preservation, and contemporary activists who continue this work. They face forwards, their gazes on *us*. Each watchwoman is distinctive from the next, identifiable by their bright patterned clothes, elaborate headdresses and floor-length arms. Agricultural tools - a pitchfork, a machete, a coconut cleaver - stand in for hands that stretch across the floor beyond the limits of their circle, towards us.

Peaking from the centre of their gathering, a 3m metal pole on a circular base hoists up a wavy blue shape made from shiny tarp, a waterproof plastic cover used as emergency roofing. This nocturnal backdrop is fashioned from materials distributed by FEMA, a US disaster aid agency, and emphasises the United States’s real-life presence across Puerto Rico’s skies. A new moon, the back of a  saucepan burned and stained through use, crests this inky blue sky, and cream-coloured glossy fabric attached to the back of the blue tarp cascades to the floor like the tail of a comet. At its end is an incongruous pitchfork head. Rounded metal pin heads gleam around the dark moon, a ring of stars. From the lowest point of the blue tarp tumbles a blue and white polka-dot fabric curved like an arm which drapes across the ground and ends in a heavy-duty glove, painted blue.

There is no start point for this artwork as it is a circle. Start where you please.The title ‘*Centinelas de la luna nueva*’*,* (*Sentinels of the new moon*)*,* refers to the time when mangrove roots are harvested and planted. A tiny mangrove stump, semi-hidden within the centre of this ring, only 10cm high, is enthroned on a stack of mostly green paint tin lids. This baby is eclipsed by these towering guardians, the tallest of which is 2.5m.

The artwork is elevated on a white square floor plinth, 4m squared. The watchwomen stand tightly packed along the edge of a smaller circular plinth with a radius of 3m. This circle is painted like a globe, a swathe of sky-blue borders sandy-brown and an oval of forest-green crystal glass shimmers like water. It represents the community’s ecosystem, the limits of the sweet water lagoons, the expanse of mangrove forest, and the archipelago of islands that make up Puerto Rico.

For our tale, I will introduce you first to a woman whose composition harks back to carnival characters. She is the shortest of the group, 1.8m, propped up on a paint-splattered, circular cream fan-stand and pole. Her face is a 3D cardboard mask that favours a hound or feline’s head with a long muzzle. The cardboard material is a subtle reference to the mask of ‘El Viejo’, the elder storyteller. A 5cm circular glass mirror on the tip of her muzzle is a common decorative feature used to adorn masquerade costumes. Here it suggests an open mouth, chanting or chattering to us. Behind her brown head is a flat circle, a midnight blue halo. A long scarf tied to the middle of her neck, behind her head-mask, is made up of three pieces of material, looped together in red, yellow, then green. This 1.2m scarf, an outstretched mono-arm, has a 30cm metal claw at the end which extends beyond the circle to the floor plinth as if beckoning us or warding us off. Her black triangular ears, a disused wooden crab trap, are pricked-up, alert to any new sound. Her torso, two empty hessian sacks like those used by locals to carry coconuts and crabs, hang limply one in front of the other from the fan base’s pole. From the back of her head, a train of pink bubble wrap flows, hanging from a small, deflated boxing punchbag. The figure stares out, without eyes, part woman, part animal.

A gold drum on a 80cm high tripod, from which hangs a large, curved twig broom, stands between her and her neighbour on her right. This watchwoman is much taller, 2.5m, constructed around a metal pole wedged into a stack of upside-down buckets as a base. Her torso, a metal container used across many Caribbean islands as the musical steel pan, has been cut in half length-ways, giving her a curved back. She is two-toned, hessian beige and sparkling turquoise. Her head recalls a sister artwork, the nearby *Centinela de la luna negra*, where a dozen dried branches of wood protrude from a sideways grey bucket to suggest a round face. These mangrove branches however are slightly less unified, wonkier, and range from reddish brown to a darker burnt brown. She’s wearing a hessian headdress that covers the sides of her head and neck with one polished wooden horn jutting up at the top. Sequined turquoise fabric drapes around the bucket forming her face like chin-length hair.

The back of the base of the steel bucket the mangrove branches are nestled in is not concealed. On the side of the figure’s hessian draped head is a circular mirror encased in plaited rope, suggestive of an ear. Hanging from the steel bucket's black plastic handle is an arm of grey toned fabrics and blue rope, ending in a turquoise and grey gardening glove which hovers over the drum head to her left. She smacks out rhythms on whatever is close to hand. Her right arm morphs into a 45cm curved machete, its point touching the floor. The figure is robed in a dark green raincoat, extended at the bottom with a second lighter toned raincoat lined in a gingham check. Within the coat, her baggy, spotted hessian breasts sag towards the floor, painted in spots that reference the ‘vejigante’ carnival mask said to symbolise ancestors returning from the other world. Her exposed torso reveals an intestinal tangle of hosepipe, jungle-vine-green.

Follow the circle round, heading right, you have reached a halfway point. [pause]

Meet a towering 2.6m woman, also constructed around a bisected red-painted steel pan with a metal electric fan base swaddled in a cloud of red and grey tulle. Her head is a donut-shaped plastic object with concentric cream and hessian-beige circles of rope and wood looping towards a large hole at its centre. The hole which is ringed in rope, recalls a gaping mouth, open in wonder or cooing musical notes. Its original use, long forgotten, its wide brim is tilted skyward as if her gaze were surveying all that is airborne in the night. She is bedecked in a majestic canvas robe which is painted in a busy camouflage pattern of sensual, swimming swirls of red, pink, black and white. Its elongated train snakes across and spills over the circular plinth and becomes an arm, eventually ending in a coconut cleaver to her right. Her left arm, a polished brown mangrove branch, is covered in a pale blue tarpaulin, its soft vertical folds heightening its volume and glamour. This sleek arm ends in a pointed blade.

Keep going, follow the bend right, and before you is a warrior-woman suited up in armour, stationed on a strip of desert yellow-orange. A violet helmet made from a moped base encases her head which is a shiny bronze shovel. The hole where the shovel’s handle once sat sits towards the bottom centre of the helmet like a pouting mouth. Behind the helmet, a hessian sack flows like hair, ending in a trim of pale blue rope. Another hessian sack covers her torso - a chainmail of sorts. It’s draped over thick palm trunks, voluptuous gnarled bark legs that flare out at their base, rooted firmly to the ground. Her hand, an axe-head attached to a white plastic curtain track, points right, urging us on to our final sentinel. We are almost full circle.

This guardian has an androgynous and boxy form which echoes the warrior roots of her helmeted sister. She is a 2.6m soldier standing over the crescent of sea-blue on the circular plinth, protecting her community from flood, tsunami and invaders on the waves. A 1m sheet of orange fabric used to cover cars makes for a long drooping head, an almost featureless mask. A decorative circular mirror becomes a lone, observant eye, near the centre of her forehead. Her solid torso, an upended wooden box painted black, is perched on a black metal stool with four thin legs. Atop the box, partially shrouded by the orange fabric, is a welding mask attached to a blackened metal box fixed to the top of an upturned cooking cauldron. Inside the open back of the painted wooden box is a vertical metal rod, her spine, weighed down in a cube block of cement. She is all straight lines and sharp angles. An industrial tow hook, rusted by time, is clipped over the base stool’s front side. A round blue shield is pressed against her right side, a former bin lid hooked with a thin grey wire through a handle on the side of the cauldron. Her right arm is a sword, a machete with a gaffer taped handle which appears beneath the shield, reaching behind her. And her left arm is a curved strip of wood 2.5m long, tied with a wire over the stool top, with a deflated punchbag end. It sweeps from left to the far right, almost touching the first woman’s animal claw, bringing us back to the beginning.

Under the dark glow of the black moon their circle is unbroken. With their backs to the baby mangrove in the centre, they stand vigilant and unmovable, protecting the next generation of the mangrove.