

Tasting the Caribbean: The Art of Quisqueya Henríquez

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Quisqueya Henríquez (b. Havana, 1966) has had solo exhibitions at Artist Space, New York; the Miami Art Museum, Miami; the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh; the Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico; the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore; and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York. Group exhibitions include the VI Bienal Internacional de Tenerife, Islas Canarias, Spain; the 8 Bienal de Cuenca, Ecuador; INSITE 97, San Diego, California; the V Bienal del Caribe, Museo de Arte Moderno, Dominican Republic; "Tutto Normale," Villa Medici, Roma; and most recently, "This Skin I'm In," Museo del Barrio, New York. Henríquez lives and works in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Isabela Villanueva received her B.A. in Latin American literature from the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello and a Diploma in French language and civilization from La Sorbonne in Paris. She also received her M.Litt in history and art connoisseurship from the University of Glasgow, Scotland. She currently serves as assistant curator at the Americas Society Art Gallery.

Rootedness does not seem ideal for an artist since wandering leads to an expanded imagination. One could then assume that Quisqueya Henríquez has plenty of imagination because she has drifted between Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and the United States since she was very young. Perhaps such geographic mobility may in itself constitute the multifaceted Caribbean identity. It is useful to remember that none of the original inhabitants of this cultural zone survived the Spanish conquest and colonization, and that the current Caribbean population comprises a mixture of the descendants of European

settlers, forced immigrants of the slave trade, and hired low-cost labor imported after the abolition of slavery. Displacement continues to take place in the present, but migration is now in reverse, motivated by a search for the promising wealth of metropolitan countries.

Quisqueya Henríquez's performances and photographs are thought-provoking; they scrutinize the environment and the places surrounding her to make the public reflect on deeper social issues. Her works are conceptual renderings that provide a truthful representation of the Caribbean, counter to the exoticized conception of the region as a secluded, tropical paradise for tourists, a beautiful nowhere. The artist reveals a realistic view of the Caribbean as a run-down and sometimes underdeveloped place unsuitable for postcards.

Instead of showing the popular made-for-export representations that sun-addled foreigners love to tote back from their Caribbean idylls—the ones showing happy islanders surrounded by lush palm trees and quaint thatch-roofed huts—Henríquez photographs scenes that directly or indirectly portray daily life in a Caribbean city. In one of the *Public Space* series of photographs (Figure 1), the prominent visual images are garbage bags. The artist deliberately chose to show a horizon line where the waves, sky, and unpopulated beach are visually blocked by trash. In other photographs, she captures impoverished urban areas and intimate artifacts of the tropical urban poor that become symbols, up close, of social pain.

Caribbean Sea Water Ice Cream (2001) (see Figures 2–3) invites visitors to consume turquoise ice cream made from Caribbean sea water. Like the

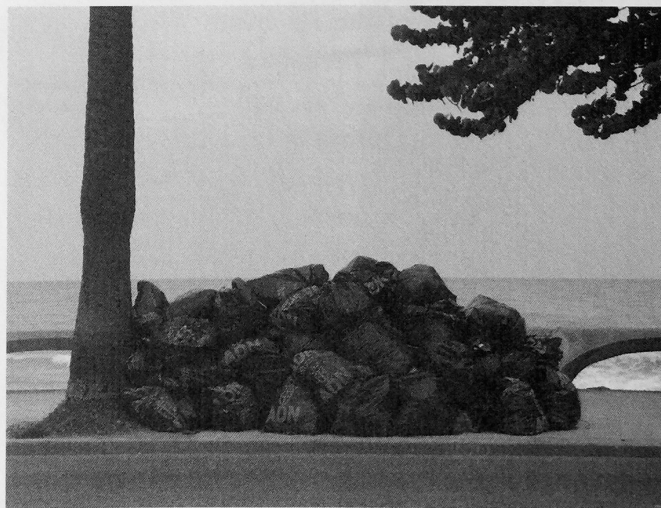


Figure 1. *Horizon Line* (from the *Public Space* series), 2005. Digital photograph, 34" × 45" (edition of 3).



Figure 2. *Caribbean Sea Water Ice Cream*, 2002. Digital photograph, 40" × 40".

edible artworks by the late Joseph Beuys and Dieter Roth, Henríquez's ice cream shows how consumable materials make art more accessible and at the same time parody the seriousness of the art world. Since the visitors are encouraged to taste the ice cream, over time the artwork is destroyed by the viewer's consumption. Haroldo de Campos's comments on the anthropophagic metaphor, as it was associated with Brazilian Neo-Concrete art in the 1960s, can be applied to the cannibalistic intake of the ice-cream since the public is "swallowing-up the universal cultural heritage. . . . It involves. . . . transvaluation: a critical view of History. . . . as well-suited to appropriation as to expropriation, dis-hierarchization, or deconstruction."

The ice cream raises serious questions about consumption, gratification, permanence, and preservation; it employs the power of art to produce pleasure while also providing "food for thought."

With this performative work Henríquez has transformed the Caribbean into a commodity for consumption. She has used food to convey the change and decay of the Caribbean. At the same time, the food is an art medium, so art becomes consumable and made relevant to everyday life.

As indicated by the name *Mockeries*, the title of the series that includes the piece *Caribbean Sea Water Ice Cream*, Quisqueya Henríquez has humorous and ingenious ways to make the public more aware of Caribbean reality.



Figure 3. *Caribbean Sea Water Ice Cream* (participative project; view of the piece at "Art Chicago 2002"), 2002.