

## First Contact



*First Contact. Gauze. Latex. Aluminum Supports. 10' x 15' c. 2023*

As I stand before this work I called "First Contact," a flood of emotions and memories washes over me. This ten by-15-foot abstract painting is not just an artistic endeavor; it's a small journey through time and an exploration of identity. The gauze surface, saturated in vivid hues of latex paint, is my portal to a world of historical significance and personal discovery.

I wanted to use my studio's large industrial walls to convey a scale and hypnotic repetition of patterns. I was in a limited way, attempting to capture the essence of windswept tropical grass, a testament to the lush landscapes of Puerto Rico. In

this work the blues and greens dance across the canvas, echoing the natural beauty that once thrived there. But there's more to this work than meets the eye; within the undulating grasses lie ghostly remnants of sun-parched huts, a poignant tribute to the indigenous people who once called this place home.

The historical backdrop of Puerto Rico and its native inhabitants, the Taino, has always been a part of my consciousness. My mother in a limited way,



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often spoke of our heritage. While I can only trace my roots through DNA, my mother's stories always resonated deep within me. She was adamant about our indigenous heritage, even when societal labels tried to dictate otherwise. I recall times when I mentioned my grandfather's darkskin ancestry, only to have my

mother gently correct me, affirming our indigenous lineage. She passed away before I could validate these roots through DNA testing, leaving me with a lingering question: Would she have been surprised or delighted with the affirmation of our ancestry, perhaps even saying, "See, I told you"?



*Detail.*

The journey to unravel the mysteries of my heritage led me to a deep dive into the Taino culture and the profound injustices inflicted upon its people. Centuries of erasure and violence are difficult to fathom, let alone explain.

In my quest for understanding, I turned to modern tools like AI imaging, hoping to reconstruct an imagined world - a point of contact with the past. Yet, I must admit my efforts fall short. The information that fueled these visions came from a vast sea of contemporary knowledge, leaving me with fragmented glimpses of a distant history. Nevertheless, my inquiries persist, allowing me to explore myriad possibilities and permutations in a dreamlike reconstruction where I find myself transported to a different time and moment.

As I delved deeper into my ancestral past, memories of my youth resurfaced. I was transported back to Puerto Rico, where I was shuttled at the age of three. The images of endless fields, under azure skies, flooded my mind. El Yunque, with its misty, rain-drenched mountains, was as vivid then as it is now in my memory. In my attempt to resurrect these dreamlike moments, words failed me,

leaving only a particular kind of gesture to capture what I saw, dreamt, or remembered.

In this work, I see the vibrant colors of the sky, the lushness of the landscape, and the cascading tropical rain. The small huts, nestled within the landscape, appear as if they are awaiting an unseen predator, a quiet testament to the violence that has stained the history of the Americas - a long history painted in shades of red.

The artwork is large, its surface delicate and vulnerable. The repetitive, layered gestures, rendered with contemporary industrial paint have accretion creating surface depth.

"First Contact" is a document, a reflection of my journey of self-discovery, and tribute to the Taino people, in its visual representation of a complex tapestry of history, identity, and memory.

Noel Caban c. 2023