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NEWSMAKER

## JOSE LERMA

A FORMER LAW STUDENT who began pursuing art only at age 30, Lerma employs painting and sculpture in installations that refer to place and history in eccentric ways. (His show earlier this year at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York drew connections between the lead-up to the French Revolution and the 1980s professional-tennis scene.) Born in Spain and raised in Puerto Rico, he's currently engaged in building what he calls a "still life" of Art Basel Miami Beach in the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, assembling the work over the course of the exhibition, titled "La Bella Crisis," using found materials. *Modern Painters* executive editor Scott Indrisek spoke with Lerma on day four of his scrappy on-site experiment.

**SCOTT INDRISEK:** *How did the Detroit show come about?*

**JOSE LERMA:** When I looked at the space at MOCAD, it lent itself to something like an art fair. I put a bunch of white tarps dividing the space to look like booths. I shot a lot of images at Art Basel Miami Beach last year, of a certain group of galleries, and I'm using those to make works that re-create or are inspired by those images. I'm riffing on work I saw at the fair, changing it around and reinterpreting it. One image came from Nicole Klagsbrun; another came from Landau Fine Art, one of those very conservative galleries. They're works I can use; I don't know if I like some of them. There's a really nice Joan Miró that we're using to make a huge, 20-foot painting. I have a month to re-create my own version of Art Basel Miami.

I went out trash collecting in Detroit, and I went to some thrift stores. The idea is to create this thing that kind of seems like an art fair but really looks like a gigantic painting. I'm doing one booth every day, with whatever I can find around me. I'm using paint, too—we had a lot of materials donated from the Mike Kelley "Mobile Homestead" show here, that they were getting rid of. It's essentially like a still life of an art fair.



José Lerma in New York, 2014.

NEWSMAKER

**SI:** How exactly are you reinterpreting the original pieces?

**JL:** I find one of the images that I like—for instance, one is of work by a Conceptual artist from a Spanish gallery who collected hundreds of tourist postcards of sunsets. So I built a gigantic sunset using reflective fabric and junk that I found that was yellow, to simulate a kind of floating space.

**SI:** Overall, how does the concept of an art fair play in a city like Detroit right now?

**JL:** I'm not interested in the art market. I was interested in the labor part of it—MOCAD used to be a factory. I wanted an artwork that allowed me to work in here, clock in at 9:00, get out at 5:00, and sort of make stuff: in between production and art. There's this pressure to produce, no matter what. That, to me, brought it into the spirit of the city, the history of it. The show is of Detroit, but not about Detroit.

I normally work with the history of a place, but Detroit is very intimidating; so many people have talked about it. You would have to be from here and really know your stuff. Originally, I'd wanted to talk about Puerto Rico and the fact that both places are undergoing this major crisis. But I thought it might be too arcane or too obscure to talk about a place that's so remote. So I split the difference and picked Art Basel, since Miami is geographically sort of in the middle between Detroit and San Juan. The idea was to live here for a month, to gather as much as I could—to turn the museum into my studio.

**SI:** Are you working with local artists?

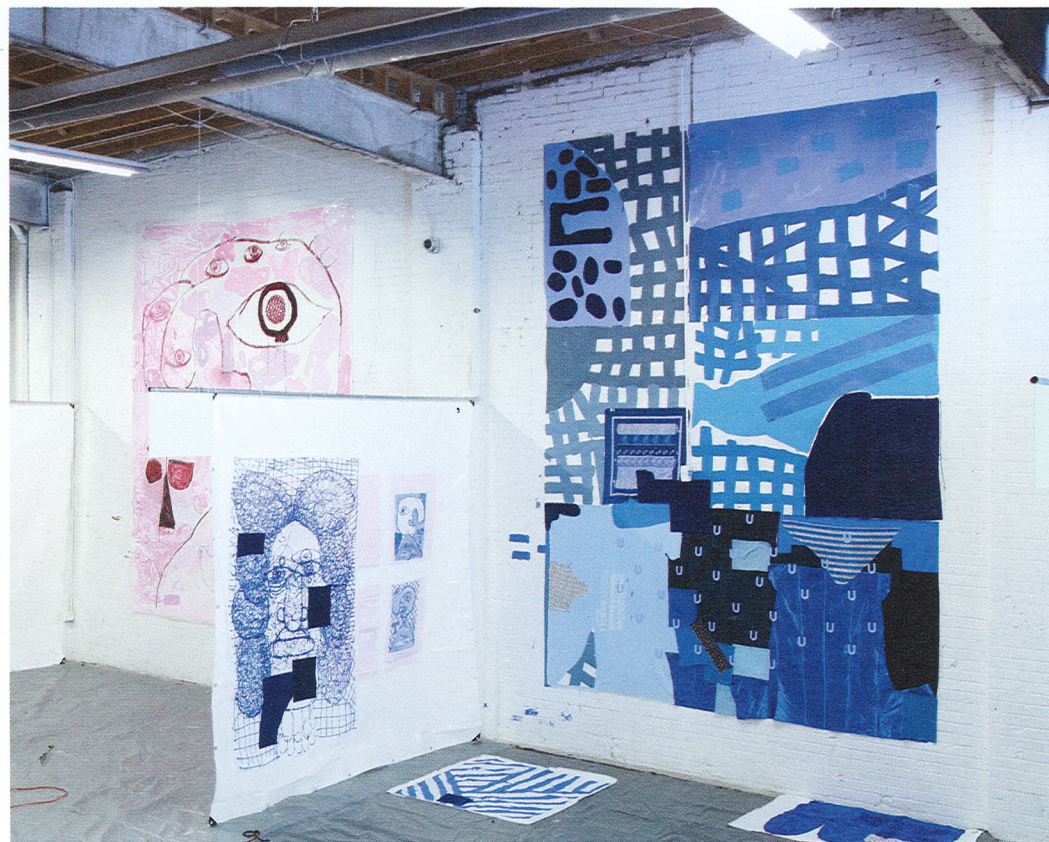
**JL:** No, it's just me and my assistant. I have an allergy to social practice and relational aesthetics. There's enough art like that, let's put it that way. I like the idea that it's an everyday struggle, trying to figure this out.

**SI:** Do you feel that San Juan and Detroit are similar, or only in the sense that they're both cities in trouble?

**JL:** My experience with Detroit is limited, but from what I've seen, it's an ideal place to make art—if you have some kind of avenue to show outside the city. Spaces are cheap; there are enough artists to have great conversations with. And in Puerto Rico, it happens that we're in the golden age for art of the island. We've never had as many artists with an international impact as we do today, and it comes at a time when Puerto Rico is in real financial trouble.

**SI:** Was there one specific thing that pushed the art scene along in Puerto Rico?

**JL:** There's a series of factors, but to me the most important was a woman named Michelle Marxuach. She started a residency called Fortaleza 302. That didn't last long, but she set up a series of three exhibitions, one every two years, bringing in international artists. They were interested in social practice, Conceptual art, contemporary versions of



"The idea is to create this thing that seems like an art fair but really looks like a gigantic painting."

Situationism—things that could be done in the city. Later she did another show out in the country. She brought all these Puerto Rican artists living in Europe or the United States, and they all met each other, plus they got to meet the curators who came down. Out of that group you have people like Allora & Calzadilla, who represented the U.S. in the 2011 Venice Biennale; Chemi Rosado Seijo; Bubu Negrón. It finally put Puerto Rico on the map.

Now, a lot of artists are going out, getting MFAS, and coming back with all this new knowledge. That's good because it's more international, but bad in that it kills a regional spirit that existed before. But Puerto Rico is very fluid, there's constant traveling back and forth. It's not like leaving for another country, or migrating to the U.S., which is a real hassle. For Puerto Ricans, it's just a plane ticket.



**SI:** It seems as if Chicago and San Juan have a real back-and-forth connection.

**JL:** There's a huge Puerto Rican community in Chicago, but the real connection happened through the Art Institute. A painter named Arnaldo Roche went there, and for me and a lot of people, that was the first exposure to this idea, that there's this school in Chicago and maybe it's a good idea to go out there. People saw Roche succeed—he was the only artist in the '80s that I can remember who had major success outside the island, in terms of exposure.

**SI:** You show with Roberto Paradise in San Juan, and will have an exhibition at the city's Museo de Arte Contemporáneo at some point next year. What will you do for that?

**JL:** Normally, it crystallizes much closer to the show for me. I kind of wanted it to be a second part of the Detroit show—but hopefully it won't be *this* thing. It's been a pretty intense month. **MP**

**José Lerma**

FROM TOP: "La Bella Crisis" in progress at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Lerma conceived of the show as a "still life" of Art Basel Miami Beach.

Installation view of "The Credentialist" at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, showing *The Countess*, a 2012 sculpture made of photo backdrop paper and glue.

FROM TOP: MIKE KULIC AND JOSE LERMA; AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

NATIONAL ART GALLERY OF THE BAHAMAS