
Entertainment

The Artists Representing Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria

Artists occupied an abandoned mall in downtown Miami to showcase their work and highlight the plight of Puerto Rico.

By [Dyllan Furness](#)

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Six months before Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc in the Caribbean, a group of Puerto Rican artists were invited to participate in a residency program in Miami by local art organizations. The artists were offered abandoned storefronts-turned-studios at a historic downtown mall, where they'd exhibit their work during [Miami Art Week](#) in December to engage an art world that often overlooks the island territory. When Maria struck and knocked the entire island offline, Puerto Rico was suddenly on everyone's radar. And the residency, [Focus on Puerto Rico](#), became more vital and more timely than ever.

Half the artists in residence were stranded on the island without power or even a plane ticket as the program was set to begin. Those already on the mainland were glued to the news. All of them were thrust into a role they hadn't anticipated—to be a voice for Puerto Rico in the wake of a disaster that may have left more than [1,000 people dead](#) and [half the island offline for nearly ten weeks](#).

Matotumba (Collective)



DYSTRÓPICAL, MATOTUMBA. PHOTO BY ON THE REAL FILM

THE EIGHT-PERSON ART COLLECTIVE MATOTUMBA POSE IN THEIR DYSTRÓPICAL INSTALLATION. PHOTO BY ON THE REAL FILM

Our proposal satirized the sociopolitical and economic crisis of a fictional future wasteland on the dystopian tropical island of Puerto Rico. It's an alternate reality where everything is artificial, and the only thing that prevails is plastic. The only other real thing we have left is our culture and traditions.

All of the sudden, after Maria, what we had conceptualized as a work of fiction became almost a reality. We found ourselves in a sort of dystopia. The total collapse on the systematic infrastructure of our country was something that anyone could see coming from miles away, but we never expected it to happen this soon.

We brought the dystopia with us. We created our own little dystopian world inside the abandoned mall full of rubble in Downtown Miami.



THE ENTRANCE TO THE HISTORIC 777 INTERNATIONAL MALL, WHERE THE ARTISTS HAVE THEIR STUDIOS DURING THE FOCUS ON PUERTO RICO RESIDENCY. PHOTO BY ON THE REAL FILM

But from isolation to governmental incompetence, the hurricane only heightened the daily struggles faced by many Puerto Ricans, particularly the poor. According to many of the artists, in response to the government's fumbling recovery efforts, exhibiting in Miami felt like a political act.

Here they tell us how Hurricane Maria changed their lives and affected the work they exhibited at Miami's 777 International Mall during their *Focus on Puerto Rico* residency.