

NY ART BEAT

Why Can't These Women be Beautiful? An Interview with Sofia Maldonado

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Sofia Maldonado's mural on 42nd Street, Manhattan. Courtesy of the Times Square Alliance

Muralist Sofia Maldonado has painted her way through her native Puerto Rico to the United States and as far as the Amazonian jungle. Her paint strokes create beautiful, if sometimes whimsical and chaotic imagery that's graced skate parks, canvases, and even Coke cans. It is her most recent work in Manhattan however, that has spurred the most page views. Her mural for the Times Square Alliance has drawn ire from some individuals and organizations, citing it as depicting a caricature, or perpetuating a negative stereotype that many prefer to forget, and exacerbated by its stature and location, which hasn't seen taboo since the Giuliani era. Where some individuals see negativity, Sofia sees beautiful, strong women. Recently NYAB spoke to Sofia on the phone about her influences, her paint preferences, and how deconstructing about our conditioning could change the way we see things.

NYAB:What of stuff were you into as a kid, as a teenager, that drew you to do the kind of art you do now?

Sofia: I was always into art school. When I got into intermediate school, I went to an art high school. But when I was around eleventh grade I started doing graffiti with my friends, stuff like that, and that's how I pretty much got my art down to the street. At that time I was into a lot of [European] sort of street art. From that, I started doing a lot of wheat paste, and developed into murals with brush. I like painting with brush instead of spray paint, and also about the time that I started in Puerto Rico, we only had Krylon [available] so there wasn't a lot of good quality of colors, and I was really into colors, so I stayed there.

So it was more out of necessity and aesthetic than anything

Pretty much, for that time, we didn't have anything [else] and we were restrained to the Krylon colors, which are, pretty...boring.

Yeah they're like Army colors. I know that you've done murals in Puerto Rico, both legal and illegal. Would you say that your art is well-received there?

Yeah, I have a big fan base in Puerto Rico, like more than I thought so. Because I started really early, so people [recognize my work] . I started in the capital, in Old San Juan. Puerto Rico is not necessarily a walk able [place] but in Old San Juan it is, so I would take a lot of abandoned buildings, and I pretty much painted every Sunday. Like, I would go to school, paint. School. Paint. I was very focused in getting new sides in painting. Also through that, I got different commissions for murals inside pubs and clubs. So, there was a big generation that grew up seeing my artwork, and through that I did some shows, and solo shows, and I got to do a lot of live painting as well. I did live painting in the Museum of Puerto Rico [Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico] and I was really young, like second, third year of college. Now from a college student, to a high school student, to collectors, there's a big range. Even little kids, like little little kids love it.

Really? [laughs]

Yeah it's really funny. There's a big art fair called Circa in Puerto Rico, they've been doing it for five years now. The last time I was there, I was doing some live painting, and these little kids come to you, they know who you are, it's interesting. It's like something I didn't even know it existed, you know? It's a big inspiration for them.

How do you think going to grad school at Pratt, shaped you, or changed your perspective as an artist?

Honestly, I would say, it didn't change that much, I was really focused. It was like the next step for me; I was in Puerto Rico, and then I could either just stay there, or go for higher education,

and get out and explore new scenes, right? A new public. I went to Pratt because I was told there was a really good professor there who wanted to work with me; his name is Ernesto Pujol, he's a Cuban artist, performance-based artist. He opened me a lot, in ways of viewing myself, and my art. And that made me understand a lot about where my place, my track is, in art.

What's the most important aspect, or message that you'd like people to get from your work?

My work varies a lot, I like to work project-based. So say, my first solo show in New York was called "Tropical Storm", and it was like more oriented towards skateboarding, broken skateboards, and how the broken boards make reference to tropical storms in the Caribbean. And through that I painted an abandoned bowl in the middle of the rainforest, and did like, a skateboard movie. It works like that, a project and then different little projects. And there have been little works where it all depends. For the Havana Biennial, I painted the whole floor in what was called *Skate My Patria*, the whole floor, and skate ramp. In Cuba, I brought a lot of donations from skateboard companies. There was another really big high-rise I painted in Puerto Rico, and that was more much inspired by the community based on single mothers, working-class mothers, and it has this big female character with this little kid, and it's also an area where there's a lot of students, so it's sort of all depends.

For the 42nd street [mural] pretty much, I've said it, [laughs] it was pretty much for Caribbean women, and a specific style of women, and the one I did in Connecticut, it was more based on that community. Women, showing themselves through the windows, sort of how communities are, like if you live in [an apartment building] and you open up the window to talk to your friend on the other side, or maybe you fight with your grandma [laughs], it was more like community-based interaction for females. When I was in Connecticut with the mural I was



working on, I got to meet these girls working in a nail salon, and I took the wood cutouts into the salon, and the girls did the nails on the wood cutouts. I would say that [with my work] I have an idea, and I flow with the circumstances. I'm really open for improvisation a little bit.

Going from that, for the mural that's in Manhattan [on 42nd St], what was your inspiration to draw the kind of characters that you ended up with?

Well, my inspiration was more of the Caribbean women I'm familiarized with. It's a type of imagery that I've been working with for a while. My intention

was to represent that type of female as seen in New York, and Connecticut as well. The girls from the nail salons [in Connecticut] pretty much inspired me to do that. Through working and doing murals in communities, I feel like this sort of image lacks representation and I feel I wanted to make a [testament] to women who to identify with that sort of style.

Normally [in other works] when you drew this style of women they were painted in an abstract color; so what made you decide to go from women in various yellows and greens and blues to a more natural pigment?

I started doing the actual pigments in the mural in Connecticut, and I really liked the result of it. I had a lot of fun. So for this mural it was going to be a different layout, like sidewalk level, so I decided to try it. I wanted to try the same thing I did in Connecticut, using the same thing, the wood cutouts, and the type of girls too. This was going to be huge, like eight feet tall. I wanted to challenge myself. I really enjoy painted the real color scheme of women, instead of painting them blue or green. I've been living for four years now in New York, and in Puerto Rico there's not really a cult of identity, and here there's a cult of identity, and I wanted to represent women of the Caribbean, I wanted to have a diversity of color, and be proud of that. It's beautiful! I'm super happy with how that mural turned out. I would say that quality-wise. There's a lot of detail, and I'm really proud of that; still.

There has been some protest of the mural; mostly little groups who think that it perpetuates a stereotype, or it's offensive. But, as an artist, a female Latina artist, don't you think it's odd, or ironic that people are criticizing you for creating stereotypes of something that you think are beautiful?

For me it's beautiful. But, when you're talking to different people, or being interviewed for different radio shows, where you can talk, one-on-one with different versions of the story, I came to the conclusion that my point of view as Puerto Rican, as born and raised Puerto Rican in the island, is very different to a Latina or a black woman. Totally different history, background, even beauty aesthetics. In total, what represents you, what makes you feel proud. So for me, the total aesthetic, the reason I painted it, I will say that it makes me feel proud. I love women who carry that image; yeah girl, go for it. But at the same time, if you want to be a super diva, yeah go for it too. It's not that I prefer somebody to some others. I just want to say right now, if you dress like that, girl, honestly, there's nothing wrong. The only way it's wrong is that we've been told for centuries, from time to time, that sort of look is negative. That's something that's been imposed here in America. I'm sorry for people who read it as negative, but you have to understand that that's how you've been introduced to that image. Yes, I know that Hollywood has used it as a negative thing. Yes, I know there's a legacy of negativity to it, but we can deconstruct that. Because everyone sees it as negative, it's negative. I don't see it like that. I know women who dress like that, and they're working women, and we talk about it, yes. People don't respect you, as much if you're dressed like

that, that's for sure, but I think if we start shifting in that mentality or accepting it, I think there will be a better understanding.

Also, my concept was not to start this controversial dilemma. I think the mural opened that door by itself. I've been working with this imagery for a while now, but it's a beauty thing; these girls exist, it's a beauty and it's recognizing these women. I do have maybe an alter ego like that. I do dance to Reggaeton, I get up near the stage and I get crazy, and it's like that. I'm proud of it. It was a bit of surprise, this controversy, but I know where it comes from. Even though there are people who don't understand it, I know why they don't understand it.

Did you paint these kind of women, and introduce this kind of imagery knowing that thousands and thousands of people, including those not from New York, from all over the world and all over America would see it. Did you think about that when you were creating the mural?

I was more thinking like; they're going to see *my* art. I see it as *my* art. That's what my art talks about. I was not going to change my style, my line of work.

Sofia has an upcoming solo show at the Magnan Metz Gallery on June 17th.