

# FIRELEI BÁEZ

By The Editors, Firelei Báez, Kerry Bickford and  
Stephanie Smith

**F**irelei Báez often takes historical documents as a starting point to imagine future interpretations and possibilities for the sites they depict. For *Commonwealth*, Báez created two new works that overlay historical maps from Philadelphia and Richmond with powerful new imagery, the works presented at billboard scale outside the Community Education Center on Lancaster Avenue in Philadelphia and on the exterior wall of the Institute for Contemporary Art's building in Richmond. The Philadelphia commission, *The Source of Self Regard (movements reimaged)*, draws inspiration from Philadelphia's history of Black liberation movements as well as from the histories of resistance and anti-gentrification activism in the city's Black Bottom neighborhood. Báez superimposes a West Philadelphia atlas plate with symbolic images of protest and protection drawn from across the Global South, including the figure of a "stone-thrower" and a *figa*, a charm carved from jet stone into the form of a fist that is worn to ward off evil. The Richmond work, *Moon minded the sun goes farther (to the Daughters of Revolution, who could fly between the Artibonite and the James River)*, centers women as agents of revolutionary change, as diasporic travelers, as healers. Yemoja, an African and Brazilian ocean deity, looks over images of protest that in turn rest on a map of Richmond. Báez's title links

**the city’s location on the James River to the Artibonite River in the Dominican Republic, invoking waters that connected Richmond, the Caribbean, and Africa during periods of colonization and enslavement. For both cities, Báez drew from symbolism connected to the past to assert a vibrant, change-making presence, an animating energy that emanates outward from the underlying place.**

**– The Editors**

**Kerry Bickford and Stephanie Smith in conversation with Firelei Báez**

***For Commonwealth, you created two site-specific billboard projects, one for Richmond and one for Philadelphia. In each case, you built up imagery on a foundation of historical maps of these cities. Why did you select these maps?***

I’m interested in looking at the past as a part of the present—how certain cycles repeat. We are all tethered to unresolved histories that still determine current actions within particular spaces. Like time capsules, these maps reveal cultural mindsets and values. The map used for the Richmond billboard is from 1873, and the map of Philadelphia is from 1872. They reflect individual and collective modes of organizing space during the same historical moment, which laid the groundwork for how those spaces are experienced today. In my research for this project I was interested in the ways that conceptions of place and community have

reflected and reinforced social relations conditioned by gender, race, and class—and most specifically, how those social relations are linked to violence on one hand, or, on the other hand, acts of revolution or cultivating spaces for healing.

***What were you looking for as you reviewed images of each city? How did you respond to that historical content within these new works?***

I was looking for maps that conveyed histories of corrosive culture or actions within each space so that I could engage with collective counterefforts to those things. My goal for this project was to acknowledge both the violent erasure and proactive recalibration that happens in each of these sites. For example, I was interested in peoples' responses to the displacement in the Black Bottom neighborhood of Philadelphia and histories of state violence within West Philadelphia in a broader sense. In Richmond, as another example, the site of Lumpkin's Slave Jail Site Devil's Half Acre is being made into a museum. In response to these narratives, recalibration is required again and again. In these works I wanted to explore how efforts for self-determination and healing in these spaces were either met with further violence or erasure—and to reaffirm, to reify, gestures of recuperation and self-definition.

***What elements of the history of the Lancaster Ave corridor, and West Philadelphia more broadly, did you focus on in particular as you developed this work?***

I was interested in looking at the individual histories of these neighborhoods—incidents such the bombing of the MOVE house or displacement in Black Bottom, for example—as intrinsically

linked and interconnected with broader concerns related to race and climate. The disregard for Black life, freedom, and independence ties these historic events together. Still today, the actions of the MOVE house towards anti-capitalist and environmentally equitable and sustainable practices are seen with a much gentler lens when enacted by white practitioners, much like the war on drugs and vilification of marijuana.

The location of the billboard in Philadelphia, and the broader area encompassed by the map, are sites of cross-cultural Black liberation, and also healing. Philadelphia is such a critical site for Black interconnection, especially with the broader Black diaspora.

***Could you expand on your insertion of a cityscape from the Global South into the Philadelphia work?***

The cityscape is meant as a signifier for all the provisional housing forced upon people living on the edges of capitalist states. The imagery being thrown by the figure is a mashup of *favelas* and shantytowns from different sites in the Global South that often bear the weight of environmental and economic disasters caused elsewhere—the things you make out of what’s left, stemming out of the capitalist turnover. The figure’s gesture is an unequivocal rejection of these terms.

***Why did you select Yemoja, an Afro-diasporic Yoruba water deity, as the central image in the Richmond work?***

In both of these works, and Richmond in particular, I am thinking of water—the ocean, or possibly the river—as a space of cleansing and also of despair. How do you find hope within those parameters? I immediately thought of Yemoja, who is the ocean,

the beginning of life. She creates a restorative space for healing given the violent relationship the Atlantic Ocean connotes for many of us descendants of the Middle Passage, who continually find life and refuge within inhospitable places.

Caribbean poets and theorists like Edouard Glissant have conceptualized the sea as a connective, generative space. A space to exist in relation rather than isolation. The ocean is a connector and a repository of physical memory. Afro-diasporic vernacular cultures in the American South and Caribbean have rich stories of ancestors who were able to gain agency, to escape, to traverse vast spaces towards freedom through their special relationship to water. The spirituals, the myths of flying Africans (who mutinously chose to walk into the wild ocean upon reaching the new world) are gifts of strength from our ancestors to new generations. Young writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Quincy Flowers remind us through their fresh retellings: We are linked to revolution and a history of protests. Linked by waters that heal and activate something new in us.

***You laid the water imagery over a collage of images sourced from various moments of protest (which in turn overlay a historical map of Richmond). Can you talk us through some of those historical and contemporary protests?***

This piece is an homage: a celebration of the lineage of pivotal revolutionary women whose role has been silenced by normative history but who are vital to our every step towards freedom. At the right of the painting is a detail of a recent gathering of congresswomen celebrating the anniversary of the right to vote for women in the United States, paired with archival images of

the Black and white suffragists who valiantly fought for that right. For 50 years, this suffrage was exclusively for white women. Only after the civil rights movement did Black women finally gain access to the vote. Black women are always in the frontlines for civic freedom despite histories of exclusion. In the lines of the poet Gwendolyn Brooks I would like this work to be a celebration, a gentle reminder that “we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

I also want to acknowledge the support of Bernita Randolph, an ICA intern from VCU’s history department who identified the map image for me. Bernita is so inspiring. Her enthusiasm and love of research and of her city were a joy. Her deep understanding of the culture and history of Richmond allowed me to address the site with far more complexity than I could have from the outside.

***Why did you decide to incorporate images of protest in this work, at this site, in our current moment?***

Richmond has been activated and proactive to current protest movements, re-evaluating legacies—in a sense creating, in John Lewis’s terms, “good trouble.” In particular, the city has been having a lot of youth protests and, unlike Detroit, this has been well received by city politicians. The city of Richmond has been relatively more receptive to having institutional change because of the protest or as an extension of it—to the effect of the city itself recently shifting blue due to youth involvement.

The images I incorporated into this work are of this current youth protest spliced with historic voting protests in the region, from past to present: the Freedom Riders walking for the vote, suffragettes walking for the vote, the 100-year anniversary of the women’s vote and women in Congress celebrating that moment.

***How are these two works linked? Do you see them as connected, as a dispersed pair? Could you expand on your use of water as a shared motif in both of these works?***

Both sites are near water and I wanted to bring this element to both compositions. It is a signifier for both horrific loss and painful histories but also for healing, of life, of potential, syncretized. The baptismal waters in Christianity and the Yoruba force of Yemoja. The two works are related in the sense that they are coming from this same movement toward self-definition and healing, and that's why there is a link to the water—that they reflect this making of something good out of something awful.

***What does “common wealth” and/or “common debt” mean to you?***

To quote Gwendolyn Brooks again, “we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” That’s the goal of a commonwealth. To not just share physical goods but also each other’s goodwill. The success of the commonwealth is predicated by how much we are willing to give.

*Commonwealth* is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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