

English Version



Mi nombre
es Legión

~Retratos de una ciudad~
~que es muchas~

MAC PANAMÁ

My Name is Legion

Panama City is a very strange place. Panama City is a very strange place. Even for those of us who live here, the structure of the city — its neighborhoods, streets and buildings — is an inexhaustible source of surprises and questions, but only in those rare moments where we take our time to pay attention.

As an architect, I am fascinated by Panama City; as an artist and museographer, I am also fascinated by the Museum of Contemporary Art. A lot has been written about the history of the city, but its presence in our collective imaginary — the way we see the city — and in Panamanian art — the way in which we represent how we see our city — are blind spots waiting to be explored.

This exhibition, produced as a result of the Museum's Abordajes research grant program, connects stories of the city of Panama and Panamanian art to create new narratives, using art as a tool to understand our city. It proposes using the museum's collection as a starting point to reflect on the city together.

Emilio Torres
**Impossible Architecture of
a Landscape** | 1996

Mixed media.

Panama City, in a nutshell: an accumulation of different layers where concrete and rust coexist with all everything that shines and is not gold.

Thanks to:

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You Are Here

The Museum of Contemporary Art is in the right place. We are in the former Panama Canal Zone, right next to its border with Panama City, which zigzagged along what was once known as 4th of July Avenue. The Republic of Panama and the Canal Zone were literally different countries, and this condition extended for 75 years: since the Hay–Bunau-Varilla treaty came into force in 1904, until the Torrijos–Carter treaties came into force in 1979. During most of this period, the border between Panama and the Canal Zone was not physically defined, and that territory hosted businesses and exchanges of all types.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration

1.

Avenida de los Mártires (the Avenue of the Martyrs) received its name after the protests on January 9th, 1964. These protests sprung from the existence of the Canal Zone, and also due to its border, which was physically defined by a chain-link fence with barbed wire that was installed on December in 1959 following a series of mass protests. The Canal Zone was dissolved in 1979 and the fence was demolished. Ironically, in more recent years, this vanished border has become more and more difficult to cross because of an aggressive program of road expansions. Today, the *Avenida de los Mártires* is a no man's land, extremely hostile to pedestrians and almost completely devoid of commercial life; at least until night falls.

2.

The building that we now know as the Museum of Contemporary Art was built in 1939 as the Ancon Masonic Hall, headquarters of the most important lodge on the Pacific side of the Canal Zone. The architects of the building are James C. Wright — the architect of the Santo Tomás Hospital (1924) and the Gorgas Institute (1928) — and Hungarian architect Gustav Schay. Wright and Schay designed various houses and building in the neighborhoods of La Exposición and Bella Vista using a neocolonial style, richly ornamented with historicist elements: a version of the Spanish Colonial Revival that in Panama we call “Bellavistino”. Many of their buildings have been demolished, but some still stand, like the Ciudad del Saber Atheneum (1933) and the

Riviera, Sousa and Hispania buildings, all built in 1935. Contrasting with their excessive ornamentation from the Panamanian side of the border, in the Ancon Masonic Hall they applied a much more sober neocolonial language, very similar to the style seen in the institutional buildings of the Canal Zone. Even though the building has been renovated in multiple occasions, hints of its original uses still linger, like the terrazzo floor with radial bands in the upper level and the now-unused main gate on Avenida de los Mártires.
Source: The Canal Authority of Panama

3.

Gustavo Araujo

Fotoseptiembre 2000

Color photography

Image courtesy of Walo Araujo

The Museum of Contemporary Art of the past century had personality; perhaps too much personality. The walls, with that rustic texture that you either loved or hated, hid electrical outlets or light switches completely obliterated under countless layers of paint. And the floor — that floor — was a sea of endless Pirelli rubber, unexpectedly reflective. Those very particular interiors became synonymous with contemporary art in Panama, and turned into references and inspiration for many artists.

4.

Gustavo Araujo

Untitled (Feet) 2000

Duratrans in wooden lightbox

“Feet” is a site-specific lightbox: a portrait of the interior finishes of the museum, designed to be exhibited precisely in those gallery halls, giving them a leading role in the museum-going experience. Today, with the textured walls and that rubber floor gone, the piece becomes a monument to their memory.

5.

Guest piece:

Jonathan Harker

Panama hat 2005

Installation: Pirelli rubber floor and digital print on adhesive vinyl

Images courtesy of Jonathan Harker and Walo Araujo

Panama Hat is a love song dedicated to the museum’s floor, which at the same time inspires and is the raw matter for a pointillist mural that incorporates the language and materials of commercial communication: the halftone screen, adhesive digital vinyl and a banal image of a false national symbol reproduced on a giant scale.

6.

Pieza invitada:

Gustavo Araujo

Exit 2001

Duratrans in metal lightbox

Exit appropriates one of the museum’s obsolete “exit” safety signs to remind us of the real museum that awaits us right outside these walls.

7.

Pieza invitada:

Darién Montañez

The Law of Ripolin 2021

Acrylic paint on metal grill

My favorite pieces in the museum’s collection are the old light switches and electricity outlets that are in every single one of the museum’s halls, buried under decades of layers of paint. Here, an old air conditioner grill — rescued when the rooms in the museum were remodeled in 2019 — makes a glorious return home, transformed into art.

Panama, a city that is many

Panama is an accumulation of enclaves. Its urban tissue is composed of historic neighborhoods, spontaneous settlements and urbanizations built by developers — almost all of them conceived individually — that have expanded until connecting. Through time, this condition has earned the city epithets as “fragmented city,” “multiple city,” “bipolar city” or “urban quilt”. Panama is all these different Panamas.

1914

This map compiles the proprietors of the enormous pieces of land — “suburban latifundia” — that used to surround Panama City. When comparing their limits with the streets (in light blue) and townships (in pink) of today, one can see how our city is the result of the distribution of land made a hundred years ago.

Source: Álvaro Uribe. *La Ciudad Fragmentada*. Panamá, 1989.

Casco Viejo

The historic core of Panama City was founded on January 21st, 1673 on a rocky peninsula that was completely surrounded by walls. Its regular layout of streets and avenues, centered on a main square, bends towards the edges in order to accommodate the irregularities of the terrain. Very little authentic colonial buildings are left today, due to the fires and the constant cycles of

economic ups and downs that characterize our history. Today, the Old Quarter is a palimpsest made of buildings that are also palimpsests: colonial houses made of lime and stone with renovations made in the 19th and 20th centuries, which are now being remodeled to be subdivided into apartments.

Ciro Oduber
Untitled 1946
Oil on canvas

The slums

The slums of Santa Ana and Malambo spilled beyond the walls and the esplanade of the colonial enclave. This is where the servants lived and where all of the activities that did not fit inside the city took place. Its layout extended the peripheral irregularities of the intramural, along the roads to the Savanna and to the mouth of the Rio Grande. When the railroad was built in 1855, new slums appeared on the other side of the tracks: San Miguel, Guachapalí and El Marañón. After the order to depopulate the Canal Zone in 1912

was executed, these settlements were replaced by barracks and tenements that housed the thousands of workers that built the canal. The same kind of development took place in El Chorrillo. Today, almost every single one of those houses has burned down, fallen, or been demolished in order to make way for unfortunate social housing projects.

Juan Manuel Justiniani

Once upon a time and everything keeps being paper 1984

Etching

The Zone

The Canal Zone was a 10-mile wide territory granted in perpetuity to the United States in 1904 for the construction, operation and protection of the canal. Initially, Panama City was completely surrounded by the Zone, until its limits were modified in 1914 to allow the city to expand to the east. Since the Zone was literally a different country, its urban layout and architecture were completely different to those of Panama City. The Zone is a company town based on the principles of the City Beautiful movement, a utopia with no private property. The streets snaked along tropical vegetation and the buildings were uniformly picturesque, generally in a severe Spanish Colonial Revival style. The Zone no longer exists and its territory is now a part of the city, but its differences are still felt when one crosses from side of the border to the other.

Matías Costa

Zonians 2015

Color photography

La Exposición and Bella Vista

The first expansion of the city was the neighborhood of La Exposición, built between 1913 and 1916 for the Panama National Exposition. Its spacious tree-lined avenues and generous regular blocks were filled with institutional buildings and large suburban houses built for the elite, most of them in neocolonial style largely influenced by the architecture in the Zone. The real estate success of La Exposición inspired the development of the Bella Vista neighborhood in 1918, at the hands of a consortium led by Minor Cooper Keith — banana magnate of the United Fruit Company. The Bella Vista neighborhood blocks are twice as long as those in La Exposición to make for more sellable land. Today, most of the original homes have been demolished — and every year more buildings fall — and replaced by vacant lots, sketchy motels or huge apartment towers on the waterfront..

Mariano Eckert

Ligia S. Sogandares 1972

Oil on canvas

First peripheries

The great private lands that surrounded the city prevented its natural growth, so between 1914 and 1920, the first peripheral neighborhoods for workers — Carrasquilla, Pueblo Nuevo, Río Abajo and Juan Díaz — appeared many kilometers to the east. In 1923, fishermen displaced by the construction of the Santo Tomás hospital founded the town of San Francisco de la Caleta, and in 1932 Boca la Caja was occupied, the first slum neighborhood in Panama. Little by little, the private lands started to urbanized. The ones closest to the city center were marketed for the

bourgeoisie: La Cresta, Campo Alegre, Obarrio and El Cangrejo, built between 1939 and 1944. Towards the periphery, new developments were aimed at the popular classes: San Francisco became urbanized in 1936, and Parque Lefevre in 1940. In 1946, the state developed Miraflores and Betania along the Transístmica road, which had been built in 1942.

Manuel Adán Vásquez

Landscape 1967

Oil on wood

New peripheries

The end of the Second World War caused an economic slowdown that unleashed a new wave of occupations of vacant lots. Around 1946, Curundú, Veranillo and Panama Viejo appeared, followed by San Sebastián and Loma de La Pava. In 1956 Monte Oscuro was invaded and the exponential growth of San Miguelito started. The self-built neighborhoods have been joined by new urbanizations that crowd countless tract houses repeated serially, and even a few aspirational gated communities. Today, the peripheries of Panama City have grown in a fan shape towards the east, following the Tocumen road, and to the north, following the Transístmica road. This phenomenon is repeated on the other side of the canal, where another sea of crowded houses grows towards the west.

Álvaro Uribe

Urban Journey 2010

Color photography

Punta Paitilla

The story of Paitilla is tortuous. Its lands were stuck inside the Canal Zone from 1904 until 1914, when they were returned to Panama. In 1918, the 50 hectares that made up Punta Paitilla were annexed to the Canal

Zone in order to establish an American military reserve. In 1955, these lands were given back to the Panamanian state, who started to develop it in 1959 as a residential and tourist neighborhood, with houses overlooking the ocean and buildings on hilltops. In the mid-70s, the zoning rules gave way and allowed the arrival of buildings of several dozen floors more, which also started growing on the coast, blocking the previous towers. Today, Punta Paitilla is an accumulation of apartment buildings, each appearing taller and more luxurious than the next, as though they were participating in a contest to break records in height and price per square meter.

Beatriz (Trixie) Briceño

In-progress Sculpture 1970

Oil on canvas

New paitillas

Luxury towers are contagious. Even before Punta Paitilla became crowded, islands of towers started appearing in La Cresta and Dos Mares. After the economic boom following the American invasion of 1989, more towers began to appear in Marbella, San Francisco and beyond. In 1995, the construction of Costa del Este began, a satellite city that offered bigger lots for taller towers; and in 1997 Punta Pacífica began being built: a peninsula for more towers and two artificial islands for mansions and smaller condos. Now, the entire waterfront, from Casco Viejo to the mangroves of Juan Díaz, is a wall of apartment buildings — all sold, many empty — as if to show that in Panama Capital becomes city.

Octavio (Tavo) Toral

Untitled 1985

Oil on cardboard.

Panama, picturesque city

Panama is a city built of inequalities. Our landscapes of misery — colonial ruins, big tenement houses, slums — have been raw material for several generations of artists, whose work ranges from romanticized visions of those simpler lives to much more incisive commentary about our faults as a society.

1915

In this plan of the city, the regular grid of La Exposición contrasts with the neighborhoods of Guachapalí and San Miguel. The first few blocks of El Chorrillo can be seen, next to the border between Panama City and the Canal Zone.

Source: *Panamá Cosmopolita: la exposición de 1916 y su legado*. Panamá, 2017.

1.

Julio Zachrisson

Cándido Chaflán Díaz 1979

Ink etching

Chaflán, a renowned street buffoon from the neighborhood of El Chorrillo and inseparable friend of Roberto Durán, rises above and over the roofs of Panama City.

2.

Manuel Adán Vásquez

Sunny Neighborhood 1975

Oil on canvas

This landscape of crowded houses with small windows, and thatch and tile roofs is not terribly different from the views of Panama made during colonial times.

3.

Julio Zachrisson

Roofs 1977

Etching

From the attics and rooftops, the views of Casco Viejo were picturesque landscapes that combined rusty metal sheets with colonial steeples in the distance. Today, those views have not changed much, especially in the blocks farthest from the plazas and monuments.

4.

Roberto Vergara

Untitled 1984

Etching. Ink and soft wax

After the wealthy families left Casco Viejo in order to move to the new suburbs of La Exposición and Bella Vista, most of their colonial mansions became tenement houses. Others were left in ruins and became covered in trees. This landscape is not too different from the Casco Viejo we see today, although the current tenants are much wealthier.

5.

Manuel Chong Neto

Courtyard, wall and trash 1966

Oil on compressed cardboard

No misery landscape is complete without its pile of trash. Spontaneous dumps appear on every corner, no matter how historic the walls they lean on are.

6.

Juan Manuel Justiniani

From the hats of Grandma Matilde
1984

Etching

Tenement neighborhoods like as El Marañón and El Chorrillo, which came to host up to 80% of the city's population, were made of blocks and blocks of wooden houses with metallic roofs. A few decades later, many of them were overcrowded ruins, with crooked walls that had weakened over time due to humidity and termites.

7.

Gisela Quintero

How memories hurt 1984

The wait for miss Jocelyn 1984

Etching

Tenement rooms were almost always the minimum size allowed by law: 10 × 10 feet, and they generally had ventilation — a door and maybe a window — only on one wall. The best rooms faced the street, but all the others were rooms “where the sun does not enter, for the sun is aristocratic.”

8.

Jorge March

Great hunt 1984

Etching. Ink and soft wax

Even though its construction was simple and utilitarian, many tenement houses had ornamental ironwork — including railings and brackets — similar to the ones used in Casco Viejo.

9.

Julián Velásquez

Untitled 1984

Etching. Ink and soft wax

Tenement rooms were generally accessed through perimeter balconies, usually of the minimum width allowed by law: 4 feet. When the original steel railings rusted away, they were replaced with simple plank railings that lasted much less.

10.

Helen Rousseau
Panama #1 1950
Watercolor

Tenement houses were subdivided in one-room units that had no kitchen or bathroom, so the common courtyards were hotspots for activity, with neighbors doing laundry and their dishes, or getting some fresh air. That is where the term “silty yard” comes from.

11.

Gisela Quintero
Awakening hope 1985
Etching. Ink and soft wax

These romantic views of tenement neighborhoods share a number of common elements, such as rusty roofs, propaganda-filled walls, and clotheslines filled with rags and clothes.

12.

Isabel De Obaldía
Midas 1978

Mixed media. Pencil and ink on paper, on compressed cardboard.
During the day, tenement neighborhoods were a mosaic of buildings in different states of deterioration, filled with people.

13.

Ignacio (Kancer) Ortega
Nightcrawler amid false hopes 1985
Etching

At night, the tenements were a land of bars, drunks and garbage.

14.

Eduardo Augustine
Window #1 1985

Etching. Ink and soft wax
The window may not say much, but the clothesline screams tenement.

15.

Guest piece:
Rachelle Mozman
Roux Twins 2007

Fotografía digital
Digital photography
“*Roux Twins*” shows another exotic Panama: that of the pompous gated communities of Costa del Este. The window that crowns this ‘quinceañera’ style staircase offers an impossible view of the San Miguelito suburbs, on the opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum, contrasting the habitat of TikTok celebrities with that of many of their followers.

Panama, littoral city

Panama has always had a complicated relationship with the sea. Maybe those walls that protected it from the water, isolating it from the coast, are to blame for this coastal city that does not seem to want to be coastal at all. In Panama, the ocean does not matter, only the ocean views.

1895

This topographic and bathymetric plan prepared by the *Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama* shows the coasts in Panama city at low tide, with extensive rock formations surrounding Casco Viejo and ample mudflats on both sides. The railroad station docks can be seen, as well as the path to the mouth of the Río Grande, which disappeared underneath the canal.

Source: Library of Congress.

1.

Roberto Vergara

Untitled 1982

Etching. Ink and soft wax

Casco Viejo was initially a walled city with only a couple of exits to the sea. The walls of the land fronts began to be demolished in 1856, but today you can take a stroll on the sea walls along the Esteban Huertas walkway. From there, one can see the rows and rows of skyscrapers that make up the new marine walls of Panama City..

2.

Ramón Guardia

The marina 1975

Watercolor

A coastal port and fishermen's territory called Prieta Beach lay between Casco Viejo and the railroad station docks. The beach was dramatically reduced with the construction of the public market in 1914, and was eventually buried under the Cinta Costera II and plaza 5th Centenary in 2009.

3.

Roberto Vergara

Marina 1987

Etching. Ink and soft wax

In 1915, El Javillo was filled in and the embankment was created, which functioned as a street market until 2009 when the Cinta Costera II was built.

4.

Marco Ernesto Gomezjurado

Untitled 1973

Oil on canvas

The cabotage boats — which connected Panama City with the countryside before the National Road was built in 1936 — departed from the fiscal dock. The virgin coast of Miramar Beach and Punta Paitilla can be seen in the background.

5.

Alfredo Sinclair

Bay 1965

Oil on canvas

Prieta Beach and the embankment were always abuzz with activity, brimming with small sailboats for artisanal fishing.

6.

Al Sprague

Untitled 1979

Watercolor

Today, fishing boats are exotic things that one can only see behind the Seafood Market or in Boca la Caja.

7.

Monique de Roux

Untitled 1986

Etching. Ink and soft wax

The ocean is something to be looked at. In this typical scene from the late 80s, maybe in the defunct Balboa Park, a woman looks at the horizon while a gringo dressed in camouflage looks at nothing.

8.

Al Sprague

Landscape 7 1981

Oil on canvas

The sea views from the city are magnificent. Here, looking out from the Naos islands, we see Venao island and the Palo Seco forests, with the mountains of West Panama in the background.

9.

Sandra Chanis

A sunset over the sea 1973

Acrylic on canvas

Under the right conditions, sea views from the city can also be mind-blowing.

10.

Invited piece:

Donna Conlon

Urban Phantoms 2004

Digital video

The towers in Punta Paitilla are built floor by floor using not concrete but bottle caps, matchboxes and all sorts of urban detritus. The culmination of the works is celebrated with a chorus of “talingos,” urban bird as ubiquitous to Panama as plastic trash.

Panama, intangible city

Panama is everywhere. In much of Panamanian abstract expressionism, one can imagine impressions of the fabric of the city: echoes of the shapes that one can see on a plan, or shadows of the textures seen in the urban landscape. This is a Rorschach test for *flâneurs*.

1941

The regulatory plan of the city of the missing Brunner Report shows our city contained between the sea, the Canal Zone and the railroad. Avenues A, Central and B run through this compressed territory, and there is even room for a few parks.

Source: Ángel Rubio. *La ciudad de Panamá*. Panamá, 1949.

1.

Mario Calvit

Positive and negative 1962

Oil on canvas

An October sky, an asphalt street, a zinc roof, the gates of a lock.

2.

Constancia (Coqui) Calderón

Landscape in ochres 1962

Oil on canvas

The waterfront with buildings, masts and embankments.

3.

Georgia Magness

Ruins 1971

Oil on canvas

A tower (or an avenue?) made of rust and clay colored polygons, like blocks of a neighborhood under construction or stones from a collapsed wall.

4.

Julio Zachrisson

May showers 1974

Oil on wood

Three towers with sculptural finishes emerge from a uniform mass, like those skyscrapers of today that compete to be the most iconic and photogenic.

5.

Luitgardo Broce

Venerate 5 (1981)

Oil on canvas

Between the rain or the mist, a luminous beacon shows us the way, magnetic like a silvery skyscraper or like the giant screen on Avenida Balboa.

6.

Fernando Alda

Untitled 2011

Color photography

The skyscrapers under construction, with their scaffolding and veils, shadows and translucencies, hide sublime effects that are lost as soon as they receive their occupancy permits.

7.

Mira Valencia

From DS77-2C to DS92-3C 2001

Digital print

The best roadside billboard ever designed. A perfect grid of rigorously organized standardized colors.

8.

Guest piece:

Ana Elena Garuz

If walls could talk 2020

Acrylic on canvas

The ordering grid of streets and avenues clashes against the organic layout of a zoning plan with large green areas.

Panama, divided city

On the border with the Canal Zone, two totally contrasting cities faced each other. Here, the bucolic zonian uniformity clashed against the bustle of the most populous Panamanian neighborhoods. 42 years after its disappearance, the scar left by the border is still readable in the urban fabric.

1947

The urban layouts on both sides of the border were completely different. On the Panamanian side, land was a limited resource, so the city expanded with a dense grid of block after block of attached buildings. On the Zonian side, land was plentiful and the townships were planned with streets that snaked around the Cerro Ancón, with isolated buildings floating in a sea of lush vegetation.

Source: Library of Congress.

1.

Oscar Azar

Railroad Station 1970

Pen on paper

Before the canal came the railroad, built by an American company that in 1884 negotiated a concession of 96,000 hectares and the exclusive rights to build a canal. The concession was sold in 1881 to a French company, which then sold it to the American government in 1904.

2.

Arcadio Rodaniche

Frijoles Station 1977

Oil on compressed cardboard

The construction of the canal required the relocation of large sections of the railroad, in addition to the stations and settlements that had grown along the tracks. However, most of these lost towns did not disappear when the Gatún lake flooded, but after the 1912 Canal Zone depopulation order was executed.

3.

Joseph Pennell

Pedro Miguel 1912

Digital reproduction of a lithograph

Building the canal was the first great megaproject of the 20th century. Aside from marking the destiny of our nation for all eternity, its locks are the start of the Panamanian obsession with reinforced concrete, which is currently stronger than ever.

4.

Amalia Tapia

Working on the canal 2004

Serigraph

Even though us Panamanians are somewhat jaded with visiting the Canal — after the mandatory field trips made while in school — seeing the locks operating is a lot more impressive than we would like to admit.

5.

Manuel Chong Neto

Landscape in Red 1965

Oil on compressed cardboard

The great Chong Nieto, predicting in 1965 what a Post-Panamax container ship would look entering Gatún Lake.

6.

Julio Clement

Man is the balance of nature 1973

Ink on cardboard

Since history is written by the victors, the construction of the canal is an epic of supermen who faced the wild jungle to manufacture the modern world.

7.

Al Sprague

Untitled 1989

Etching

An element as prevalent as the tropical vegetation on the Canal Zone was the gringo soldier: also green and also feared and loathed by the average Panamanian.

8.

Aristides Ureña Ramos

Great Delight Gourmet 2015

Acrylic on canvas

Today, the Zone is called the “reversed areas,” and the ultimate trophy of the fight for sovereignty is a privileged territory where wealthy (or well-connected) people live.

9.

Guillermo Trujillo

The Unseen Eye is Watching you 1965

Oil on wood

Unlike the deserted streets of the Zone, Central avenue and the other Panamanian streets were always crowded. Today, we can see good crowds in the Zone, though mainly in Albrook Mall and the Grand Terminal.

10.

Eduardo Augustine

The border 1984

Oil on canvas

The Panamanian side offered all the excesses that had no place in the prudish Zonian utopia. Here you could drink, dance and buy anything you wanted.

11.

Hugo Bilbao

The bar 1984

Lady of the night 1984

Etching. Ink and soft wax

The border was full of bars and clubs that offered all kinds of entertainment to satisfy the insatiable thirst of the huge military population of the Zone during their leisure hours.

12.

Manuel Chong Neto

Grey Lady — Cracked prejudice 1965

Oil on canvas

There were no brothels in the Zone, but in case of need one just had to cross over to Panama. Almost since the establishment of the Zone, prostitution was an important engine of the border economy, aside from a pointed metaphor of the relationship between Panama and the United States. Despite the fact that there are no longer any military bases, the 4th of July avenue keeps attracting clients every night.

13.

Mónica Kupfer

Three faces 1979

Photoengraving

Along the border, there were also tenement neighborhoods for those who had permission to work in the Zone, but didn't have the right to live there.

14.

Invited piece:

Ramón Zafrani

Untitled 2008

Sculpture

Images courtesy of Colección Virginia Pérez-Ratton. Fotos por Ramón Zafrani y Daniela Morales Lisac

The zone is increasingly “Panamanized.” Our city has wiped with no qualms countless buildings and hectares of forest to expand highways, build housing projects, and even erect one or two glistening towers.

Panama, traumatized city

The history of Panama can be seen as a series of toxic relationships with external powers. We started out as a Spanish colony, then became a peripheral province of Colombia. After that, the siren song of the interoceanic route made us prey of American and French corporations, which eventually turned us into a country surrounding another country surrounding a canal. How are we? Well, you know, just fighting the fight: first, for independence, then for sovereignty, then for democracy, and finally for transparency and social justice. All this drama has left our city and our psyches full of wounds that are yet to heal, but it is what it is.

1989

Even though the Canal Zone was dissolved in 1979, extensive territories contiguous to the city remained occupied by the United States armed forces until 1999. This map from the eve of the invasion of 1989 shows how the city was still surrounded by military bases even 10 years after the Torrijos–Carter treaties.

Source: Lawrence A. Yates. *The US Military Intervention in Panama: Operation Just Cause*. Washington DC, 2014.

1.

Juan Manuel Justiniani

Today in America, a story to be told
1985

Etching

Panama's history, like that of the rest of the continent, is an extensive series of armed interventions. The arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century merely marked the beginning of the past, the Calvary and the cross that our national anthem urges us to cover with a veil.

2.

Roberto Vergara

The protest 1984

Etching. Ink and soft wax

The Panamanian people never had problem protesting. Ever since the slice of watermelon incident in 1856, the massive strikes of the tenant movement of 1925 and 1932, the marches towards the Canal Zone in 1959 and 1964, the manifestations of the Civilist Crusade between 1987 and 1989, and the more recent concentrations around the Legislative Palace; here, the fight is done simply by fighting it.

3.

Rufino Tamayo

Untitled 1980

Lithograph

In Panama, you can't see a watermelon slice without thinking about The Incident. The riots of April 15, 1856, lasted for a single night, but were used five months later to justify the first American armed intervention in our history: the occupation of the railroad station for three days to ensure the free transit and neutrality of the interoceanic route.

4.

Sin título 1964

Black and white photography

On January 9th, 1964, 200 Panamanian students marched towards Balboa High School (in the Zone) to demand that the Panamanian flag be hoisted up, as established in the Chiari-Kennedy treaty that had just come into force. The Zonian reaction to this pacific protest unleashed three days of violent riots that resulted in 21 dead, hundreds injured, and the end of the diplomatic relations between Panama and the United States.

5.

Marcos Lee

Centenary flag I2 2003

Oil on canvas

The march of January 9th turned violent after a confusing incident between students and the Zonian police where the flag that the students carried ended up being ripped. Today, this meticulously restored flag rests in a glass case in the Museum of the Interoceanic Canal.

6.

John Ryan (Juan Dal Vera)

The man that had no blood 1979

Pen on paper

Just like any other stereotypical tropical nation, Panama has had its multiple dictators throughout its history, both military and civilian. Whoever makes it into this list depends on which side you ask.

7.

Eduardo Pérez

Augusto Anastacio 1980

Etching. Ink and soft wax

The stories of various other foreign dictators also converge in Panama. Anastasio Somoza García from Nicaragua died in Gorgas hospital, where he had been brought by the American government after being shot in 1956.

8.

Constancia (Coqui) Calderón

555-1212 1967

Acrylic on canvas

Whoever does not jump, is a toad. Every time there are two or more feuding sides, you have to watch out for the informants that may be snitching to the opposite side, or worse, to the CIA. Telephones are no longer cable-bound, but watch out, as all our phones might be tapped.

9.

Pablo Runyan

The box of absolute privilege 1960

Oil on canvas

When a piece is this loud, there is nothing else to add.

10.

Constancia (Coqui) Calderón

Sketch for protest 85 1985

Pastels on paper

In 1985, Hugo Spadafora was murdered and Nicolás Ardito Barletta was forced to resign the presidency: those seem like more than enough reasons to protest.

11.

Constancia (Coqui) Calderón

Black Friday II 1989

Acrylic on canvas

Starting in 1987, protests against Noriega got bigger, and each time they got repressed with increasing force. After the annulment of the 1989 elections, those protests got even more violent. On December 15th, the National Assembly appointed Noriega as Head of State and the country was declared in a state of war, which led to the United States invading Panama on December 20th.

12.

Adriana Lewis de Vallarino

White March 1990

Acrylic on canvas

A completely different vision of the same events. After the end of the dictatorship, it was way easier to idealize these struggles for democracy as a series of popular festivities with happy people, peace and balloons.

13.

Constancia (Coqui) Calderón

Protest N° 2 1991

Acrylic on canvas

The American invasion left a still-unknown number of dead Panamanians. Two years later, the images of bodies under hills take on a completely different meaning.

14,

Guillermo Trujillo

The justice of the north 1964

Pen and wash on paper

Ever since the 1846 Mallarino–Bidlack treaty established that the United States would guarantee perfect neutrality of the Isthmus of Panama and free transit through the railroad, we have lived convinced that justice can only come from the North, and we look forward to its impending arrival.

15.

Guest piece:

José Castellón

Palo enceba'o 2016

Color photograph

This is the money shot of the riots of January 9, 1964, which has been reproduced in countless books, murals and monuments, and that Panamanians have tattooed in our collective imagination. And there, through the smoke, are roofs of the museum. The Museum of Contemporary Art is in the right place.