

SLG

Press Release

Firelei Báez

Dates: 28 June – 8 September 2024

South London Gallery, Main Gallery & Fire Station Galleries

This summer, New Curators are delighted to present the first U.K. institutional solo exhibition by Dominican American artist Firelei Báez (b. 1981, Dominican Republic) at the South London Gallery (SLG).

Báez's visually striking practice explores themes such as folklore, gender, power, ecology and resilience. She delves into the relationship between diasporic cultures and the legacies of colonialism to challenge conventional narratives around identity and history. For Báez, folklore and myth-making are essential tools for societies to reclaim cultural narratives imposed on them by colonial powers. Her recent work, ranging from immersive installations to lush paintings, is characterised by depictions of nature, formidable female figures, and a rich colour palette.

This exhibition, which features a new body of work, spans both SLG sites and continues Báez's exploration of the Ciguapa, a mythological female figure from Dominican folklore. The Ciguapa's characteristics often shift within storytelling, yet two key traits persist: her backwards-facing feet, rendering her untraceable, and her flowing, lustrous mane. A trickster and shapeshifter, she undergoes another transformation in Báez's interpretation, melding aspects of animal and plant life; her once long, straight hair is depicted as a fur pelt or abundant foliage. The changeability of the Ciguapa highlights narrative inconsistencies and invites viewers to scrutinise their interpretations of what they understand to be true.

In the Main Gallery, Báez draws from personal, lived experiences of climate change and migration in both the Caribbean and the United States to create an immersive installation. The overhead canopy, reminiscent of hurricane tarpaulins, symbolises refuge and disaster. Pinholes of light shining through the worn fabric create the effect of dappled sunlight on a forest floor or when it penetrates the ocean's surface. Large-scale painted silhouettes of Ciguapa figures are surrounded by foliage clusters in different stages of growth and decay. This use of greenery symbolises the enduring resilience of nature in the aftermath of ecological disasters.

Laid in sand on the gallery floor is a neon work that combines the figures of Atabey, the Taino mother earth spirit revered for freshwater and fertility, and Oshun, the Yoruba deity of rivers, love, beauty and prosperity. Together they symbolise Erzili (sometimes spelt Erzulie or Èzili), who is a spirit of love in Haitian Vodou, a practice that blends influences from Yoruba, Taino and Catholic cultures. An accompanying soundscape blends natural and artificial sounds, blurring geographical boundaries and distorting perceptions of time.

At the Fire Station, a floor-to-ceiling abstract mural adorns one of the ground-floor galleries. In another gallery, pages from deaccessioned historical books find new life as surfaces for paintings. By layering figurative elements, symbolic imagery, and

abstract gestures, the intended purpose of these books is obscured, allowing the opportunity for personal interpretation. By revisiting and reinterpreting historical narratives, Báez creates a richer, more immersive viewing experience that invites visitors to envision the future with openness and collaboration.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a public programme and exhibition catalogue, which will be published later in 2024.

The exhibition is curated by the inaugural cohort of New Curators fellows: Carol Bedoy (U.S.A./Mexico), Courtney Brown (U.S.A.), Felix Choong (U.K.), Lemeeze Davids (South Africa), Rosie Fitter (U.K.), Lucia Jurikova (Slovakia), Aditi Kapoor (India), Makella Ama Ketedzi (Ghana/U.K.), Rey Londres (Cuba/U.S.A.), Nikita Sena Quarshie (U.K./Ghana) and Amandine Vabre Chau (France/Hong Kong).

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For further press information, images and interviews, please get in touch with Anna Jones, Head of Communications: anna.jones@southlondongallery.org

NOTES TO EDITORS

Address and Opening Hours

South London Gallery, Main Building: 65–67 Peckham Road, London, SE5 8UH

South London Gallery, Fire Station: 82 Peckham Road, London, SE15 5LQ

The gallery is open Tuesday – Sunday.

Social Media

Twitter: @SLG_artupdates

Instagram: @southlondongallery / @new_curators

Facebook: South London Gallery

Artist Biography

Firelei Báez (b. 1981, Dominican Republic) received an M.F.A. from Hunter College, a B.F.A. from the Cooper Union's School of Art, and studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. In 2024, Báez will be the subject of her first major US survey at the I.C.A. Boston, curated by Eva Respini. Her work has been presented in many significant international exhibitions, including the inaugural installation of the I.C.A. Watershed, Boston (2021), curated by Eva Respini, now on view at The Momentary in Bentonville, Arkansas, and The Milk of Dreams at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022), curated by Cecilia Alemani. Recent solo presentations of Báez's work include exhibitions at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek; Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; and Pérez Art Museum Miami.

About New Curators

New Curators offers aspiring curators from lower socio-economic backgrounds a paid, 12-month intensive curatorial training from its base at the South London Gallery. This unique programme is designed to equip the next generation of curators with the knowledge, practical skills, networks, and confidence needed to thrive in the contemporary art world and transform it from within. The programme comprises academic seminars, skills training sessions, extensive networking opportunities,

coaching and mentorship, and practical experience working collaboratively on a major exhibition.

www.newcurators.org

About the South London Gallery

The South London Gallery (SLG) was founded in the 19th century by philanthropist William Rossiter to 'bring art to the people of South London'. Today, the gallery comprises its original site at 65 Peckham Road, the Fire Station, which opened to the public in 2018, Art Block, a space for local children and families on Sceaux Gardens Estate, and two permanent gardens.

The SLG has an international reputation for its contemporary art exhibitions by established, mid-career and younger artists and programme of film and performance events. Its highly regarded, free education program includes a peer-led young people's forum, family workshops, artist-led projects and commissions on local housing estates, and a programme for looking after children.

www.southlondongallery.org