

Radamés “Juni” Figueroa



All images: *Tree House—Casa Club*, 2013 (installation view, Naguabo, Puerto Rico). Wood, plastic tarp, bamboo, zinc iron, corrugated plastic, glass windows, and paint, 299 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 192 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 192 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (760 x 490 x 490 cm)

Born 1982 in
Bayamón, PR

Lives in
San Juan, PR

Sin Salsa No Hay Paraíso (Without Salsa There's No Paradise): A Conversation with Radamés "Juni" Figueroa

Pablo León de la Barra



Pablo León de la Barra: Over the past five years, you have worked on a series of public artworks—from your tropical bus stops (2008–9) to animal print-painted rooftops in La Perla, Puerto Rico (2009). Can you explain this transition from painting to public space?

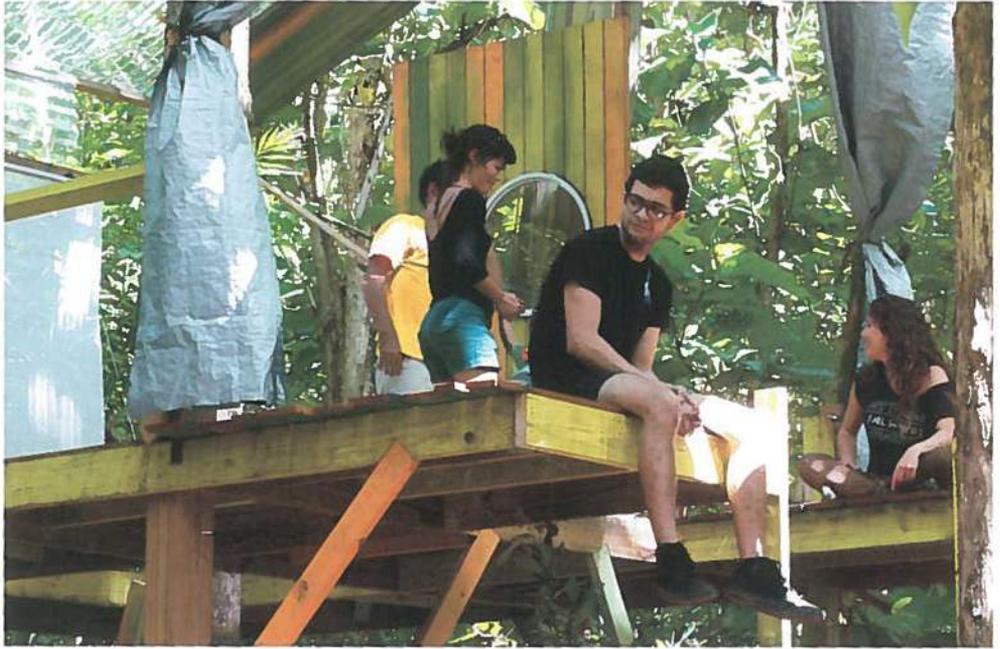
Radamés "Juni" Figueroa: Painting is a medium without limits, but I try not to become a slave to any medium. Public spaces open a wide range of inspiring possibilities. I love transforming my experiences and projecting my lifestyle into my artwork, creating environments and designing experiences within the context of art.

PLB: You have been exploring the concept of the "tropical readymade." Can you describe how this idea has developed over the years?

RJF: The tropical readymades are the result of living on a wonderful island that is also somewhat wild. I grew up between the mountains and the city, and with so many interesting things in my surroundings, I don't have to go far to find inspiration and a connection between art and nature. I started to grow plants in my sneakers and inside footballs, and so developed the tropical readymade.

PLB: There's a long tradition of using plants within exhibition spaces; Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica and Marcel Broodthaers included plants in their installations, and museums have used plants as decoration. Can you tell me more about your interest in incorporating plants and vegetation-based environments into your art and in bringing art to vegetation?

RJF: In Puerto Rico we live between the beach and the forest, surrounded by dense vegetation. Those influences are always present when I'm producing work: the sensations produced by the climate, the flora and fauna. Addressing such sensations enables me to speak of where I come from without addressing the political in a literal way. Like Oiticica, I like creating environments in which bodies interact with the work. I speak of my experiences through the work, and what I know best is life next to the sea, the heat, the music, and a relaxed aesthetic. I adored participating in the 2011 Gran Bientropical, which took place in the jungle, because the artworks and the vegetation were in direct dialogue.



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PLB: Your *Never Ending Tropical Fountains* (2010–) are columns of tropical fruits overflowing with liquor and fruit juices that promise a never-ending happiness but also the inevitable hangover. They evoke the concept developed in the late 1960s by Oiticica of *crelazer* (creleisure), a uniquely tropical possibility of creating through leisure. Can you talk about the relationship in your work between the idea of paradise and the sometimes not so easy reality of life in the tropics?

RJF: Living in the tropics is not easy, but neither is living a city. I prefer to focus on the positive aspects of life—enjoying peaceful nights at the beach sharing ideas, food, and drinks with good friends. I believe in Oiticica's idea of *crelazer*, that leisure and creativity are tied together. A lot of my ideas come from being on the street, at the beach, or at a bar; in my studio I connect these experiences with reading, research, and picture references to develop my projects.

PLB: Your father and your grandfather ran bars in Puerto Rico. Music, especially salsa but also punk rock, is important in your work. Can you tell us about this relationship?

RJF: I pretty much grew up in a bar owned by my grandparents. My father also had a bar. Both had jukeboxes playing salsa records all day. I would sing the songs to customers for money. Salsa music from the 1970s and 1980s was the real deal—hard life, drugs, and broken hearts! The *salseros*, like the punks, spoke of their lives. They lived every moment to the maximum, without apologies. That is the relationship between punks and

the great salsa musicians: they knew no limits and produced great work under hard circumstances; they were faithful to their lifestyle. From them, I've learned how to create from whatever we have at hand.

PLB: For Beta-Local's independent-study program in San Juan, you built a giant functional sculpture—a tree house made of reclaimed construction materials from a eucalyptus forest. Can you tell me more about that project and how you activated the tree house with different activities?

RJF: I created the *Tree House—Casa Club* (2013) as part of my residency at La Práctica at Beta-Local. I collected materials throughout San Juan for nine months; once I had enough, I transported them to the middle of the Naguabo forest, where I stayed for two weeks, building the structure with friends. We used materials readily available in the forest, such as stones and water from a nearby river for the cement mix. I wanted *Tree House* to function as an experimental platform for all kinds of activities, to invite people to immerse themselves in the forest, to walk its paths and to rest from the noise of the city.

PLB: On December 11, 2009, you posted on Facebook, “Let's dream of houses on trees, coconut fountains and gardens with sound speakers. Let's do a party for tropical dreamers, a party where there's *limbers* (Puerto Rican iced rum) of *pitorro* (. . . moonshine rum aged with fruit . . .), *parcha* (passion fruit) and tamarind.” This was something of a premonition, since you have been making coconut

fountains, tropical gardens, and tree houses. What would you like to do next? What other dreams do you have?

RJF: At the time, I had those desires to create situations that celebrated life, and slowly many of these desires have become a reality. Now I am most interested in maintaining a good working rhythm and enjoying what I produce. I have always wanted to have a business of my own, whether it is a bar or a bookstore with a coffee shop. I would also like to produce music, among other things . . .

Translated by Karenin Biaggi Velázquez and Pablo León de la Barra.