Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Firelei Báez Interview

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Firelei Báez. It was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa as part of the In Colors Project. Firelei Báez and Fernanda Espinosa have reviewed the transcript and their corrections and emendations appear below.

This transcript has been lightly edited by the In Colors Project for readability. Readers should bear in mind that the original document and medium of this interview is the spoken language and that the audio recording should be considered the original source, with its particular tone and grammar.

In Colors is a project by Fernanda Espinosa, a 2022 Oral History Association oral history fellow funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This is one of several interviews conducted under this fellowship and in collaboration with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this interview, do not necessarily reflect those of the Oral History Association or National Endowment for the Humanities.

Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: We are recording an oral history with Firelei Báez. She's joining virtually from her studio in Brooklyn, New York, and this is Fernanda Espinosa, oral historian, interviewing Firelei for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, under the project In Colors. So welcome, Firelei. Thank you again so much for being here. I know we had to reschedule and I'm just happy that we came to an agreement on the date and now we're here.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Thank you for inviting me. It's such an honor.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: You're very welcome. Thank you so much. So as I was saying before we started recording, we can go in a chronological order. So I'm just going to start by asking you more about, you know—just tell us what we need to know about you—where you were born and raised, and then we can go from there.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Okay. I'm sure I'm going to forget many, many things, but I was born in the Dominican Republic and raised right at the border between Dominican Republic and Haiti in Dajabón Loma de Cabrera, where, as a rambunctious little kid I would just climb trees and roll down hills and play. Nature was a very big component in my upbringing. Some of the fondest memories I have are of being in nature and playing in nature, which I think have become foundational to how I feel in the world or what I look for in an ideal space when I'm navigating the world, which is funny because most of my life has been spent in cities. And I still look at a cityscape, and most people would be like, "It's a beautiful light at night." And I'm like, I just see pollution.

I'm not able to be romantic about a cityscape as much as I can be about a mountainscape or the meeting point between a mountain and a shoreline and the ocean. That just brings me so much joy. But in any case, yes, born in the Dominican Republic. I would mostly be sent to the countryside to Loma de Cabrera when there were student strikes, or for the summer when my mom needed a break from us, we'd be sent to our grandmother and aunts in Loma and playing there. From that point—I wonder—we zigzagged a lot between the capital and Loma.

So, to be specific—there are so many important details in that—but by the time I was about four and a half, my mom immigrated to the US. As a young child before getting to go to elementary school, I remember being sent over to my grandmother's, and it was about the point when my mom was going to emigrate. My parents divorced when I was very young, and so, this was my mom's effort to restart her life, I guess, and feeling like she needed the most distance to be able to do that. So that meant that for a few years, my older sister and I were away from her, stayed with our family, and a lot of adventures ensued, and a lot of really strong memories have stayed from that point.

I remember being in elementary school in the countryside, and one of the young children

died by drowning, and the entire school walked single-file up the mountain and went to his wake. And there was the thing where they would put iron, an old-school iron over his belly. I guess before it was a test to see if there was breath, but also I think there was some sort of exchange for the other world to give the gift of iron over his belly. And so just being able to, as an adult, see all the different symbols and the colors associated with that period are pretty interesting. To decode both the Christian traditions and the non-normative—other belief systems—that were part of that ritual that we all just kind of took normally.

[00:05:09]

Yeah, that palette still shows up in a lot of my work. I think all our uniforms were a light blue, and there was a mist walking through the woods. There were paths. It wasn't a clear road. We had to walk up paths that were carved into the mountain to walk up to that child's home and then walk back to school. So that was elementary school. I was a very distracted young child. I would draw all the time, and I think drawing was a respite for whatever was going on in the world around me. So I would always be caught daydreaming.

It was either food or drawing. There was one point, I guess when my mom came back, there was—such a blurry timeline, but I remember being—maybe it wasn't with my mom, maybe it was with my *tías*, where I was called out by the teacher, and they still did corporal punishment where they would slap your hand with a ruler. And I came back telling the tías, she just kept saying, "*Hace la clase niña!*" Smack! [mimics sound of bagging against something]. And they're like, "But what was distracting you so much?" And I was like, I was just thinking of the tangerine and the *sopita* in my lunchbox. [Laughs].

But being able to express that, I would always try to figure out what my toys, what made them work. So, if it was mechanical, I would take it apart, which would just bother the adults so much because I would come up with this destroyed toy and be like, Look, tía, this is the voice box, or, This is the thing. And they'd be like, "Oh, *azotico*! Just broke the toy again." [Laughs]. I don't know if that translates, but "azotico" is a little hellion, but it literally means the whip or something. I think that's the word.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Like a little whip.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah, *azote*. I was an "azotico." [Laughs].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, it's a rough word in a small word [laughs].

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I was going to ask you more—you said that your mom migrated when you were around four years old—and you also mentioned your grandmother taking care of you and your siblings. Can you say more about the family that you were surrounded by and the environment, your tías, your aunts, and the other people that raised you when your mom was away?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah, so it was my maternal grandmother and my two maternal aunts. For the most part, it was actually—my mom is one of five siblings from her mom and dad. And her dad remarried and had seven other children. So we spent some time briefly with her dad and his kids, but for the most part, we were with her mom and her sisters and their children. So it was my older sister and I and some girl and boy cousins. And my grandmother was a very softhearted person, which was not necessarily very forgiving in a harsh landscape. So one of my mom's earliest memories of disappointment in her own mother was her mom not being able to kill the chickens for food. And her mom, being unable to witness the suffering of a dying chicken, just would refuse. So they'd be, for the most part, vegetarian.

And my mother just was—I guess this was a breaking point for her as a child, where then she tried to be a foil, to be almost all things different from that. So if the world was hard, she was going to respond strongly, if it needed to be work. So when my grandfather left my grandmother, my mom was probably 12, and at that point, she had to become the breadwinner. She had to go away, and as a 12-year-old, go teach first grade in another town or something like that. Which she's very proud of the fact to be able to work and to always have the capacity to find a way to work, but it also meant that it's taken a big toll in terms of softness or loving care. There's no such word as self-care in her vocabulary.

[00:10:28]

So we have this seesawing of generational balance or something. So my grandmother had these moments of extreme softness, but then she would sometimes take out some of the brunt of what society would put on her on the kids. So she was a very disciplinarian grandmother to the girls. We had one boy cousin, and he was her little twinkle in her eye. She was all softness and beauty to him. She'd save the right cut of meat, if she would have meat, or she would have the best oatmeal or the things that in retrospect are just patriarchy and internalized, but maybe she was also trying to protect us and give us the strength that she couldn't have on her own.

So to the girls, she was always very rough and very demanding. And in the end, it's kind of funny because as an adult I appreciate the ability to have that, the understanding that if things are rough, I can always deal. I'm always able to adapt. But now as an adult, I'm trying to learn the resilience that comes from self-care. I've always thought of creativity as this overflowing fountain that you can only limit by closing the spigot. Or once you start thinking that there's a limited amount, then you create that and you limit your ability to create.

But with it being boundless, there are ways of maybe taking care of the built-up calcification or the rust. Or just because the source is limitless doesn't mean that you as a vessel are not necessarily fallible or breakable. So taking care of the things that help you do. So part of this winter, too, was me trying to find ways of taking care of myself. So I went to this place in Germany where it's a medical clinic spa thing. I can never take vacations. Part of being much like my mom is, we work. We are very good at finding work, but then that means that I don't listen well when I'm in pain or listen well when—I can take care of others, but it's never easy to take care of myself. So there they did this extensive panel of allergies, and almost all the foods that my grandmother would make for us are what I'm allergic to now. And I wonder if any of those allergies were emotional reactions to the moment.

So she was a Seventh Day Adventist, my grandmother, and part of Seventh Day Adventism is almost a push towards vegetarianism. And so in the Caribbean it wouldn't be just clean veggies, there would be more like you'd want to have the *Bandera Dominicana*, the saucy meats and the veggies and things like that, stews. But tempeh and tofu and texturized vegetable protein don't handle long stewing that well. So they'd make their own gluten steaks, seitan, I think it's called, which is funny for a hyper-Christian religion to have seitan, something that sounds like Satan as their main protein. I always laughed at that when was a kid. Seitan. Basically, you would just knead dough—wheat, until you get just pure gluten. And that pure gluten is highly proteinate, but I'm extremely allergic to it now as an adult. So I have a sensitivity to gluten, but specifically to isolated gluten, egg whites. There was this one protein that in Germany, they're like, "Oh, they make this in the Canary Islands. How could you guys have possibly had this?" It's called gofio, and I used to love it as a child. It's this hominy sugar mix. It's almost like maize or something like that, but a lot of those—

[00:15:40]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Kind of like grits, but not savory?—

[cross talk]

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —not like grits. So we did have grits too. And I think it's kind of funny in DR and maybe in other places, the packaging itself was *harina de negrito.* And trying to even question it—they're rebranding now—but it wasn't until the mid-2000s that they started even questioning. And, colloquially, everybody will say that, but there are so many words and so many treats that we have that were essentially from the end of enslavement in the US and the diaspora that went to both Haiti and DR. So we have *Yaniqueques*, one of our national foods and delights, and it's johnny cakes. So there's so much of it, but that's our food. But one of the things that I was so surprised I was not allergic to, that I had massive amounts of, and especially because my mom would send us whole packets of this to DR, it was peanut butter. And recently with some of the famines they were describing this food they would send—these nutritionally dense foods they would send to towns—to get children back and to raise their weight. And it's basically a hormonal pack of peanut butter.

And my mom would send us that from food pantries, and I'm just like, How the fuck did that not affect my allergies? I used to love eating that, but it also I think might've affected me developing too soon. Around eight I had my period, which is much too young. And a lot of Caribbean babies basically develop much too soon. There are whole studies of either the agrarian practices or the foods that are imported that are really affecting adversely the

development of young women and young men too.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That's interesting. Wow. Yeah. You've mentioned your mom a couple of times, and as you were talking about—I have my own stories related to periods of emotional distress and allergies that I can tell you later. But I was thinking, can you say more about the ways you kept your communication, or you and your family kept your communication with your mother in that gap of years that you stayed with your grandmother, in addition to sending you these foods that you liked?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah. So before, I guess, it was still long-distance calling, which we still have. So she would send us recorded tapes and a lot of letters, and the adults would just read them out loud to all the children at the same time. And, sometimes, I think my older sister was like, "Why aren't these privately read to us?" A lot of things that could have been just intimate moments were just taken for granted. Or she would always send toys, she'd collect throughout the year different toys, and they would be first dispersed among the family and then among us. But she took that as a point of gratitude because they were taking care of us. It's not like you could just—yeah. So, lots of letters, and we would send her tapes back and try to send her letters back, and she would send us these—there would be splotches where her tears had blurred the letters.

And as a child, I remember not really connecting completely. My sister's a year older than me, and she's always been able to—I always went inside and she always went outside. As a three-year-old, she decided she wanted to be a doctor. She wanted to just save lives. And at that point, she was the best drawer in the world. She could handle crayons like no one. So I wanted to just be like her. And I think she pivoted as soon as I caught up with her crayon skills. But by then I was hooked. I wanted to be an artist for the rest of my life. And then she decided to be a medical doctor. And that always meant that whenever there was a point of confrontation, she would be the one to address it, if an adult—always in a very well-behaved way, but she would address it. She would question the aunts and question my grandmother and address—That was probably why when she finally—she was always such a sweetly behaved child, so it was a very big shock to her when she came to the US.

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I think her questioning my mother in ways that were just not acceptable in our upbringing—children are meant to be seen, not heard. Especially as a little girl, you're meant to be waiting to be activated. You're just a beautiful flower sitting, and then ready to be picked and smelled [laughs], whatever. When she came to the US, she actively questioned my mom and was like, "Why do you put us in danger? Why is this? Why is that?" And my mom sent her back to the DR for a year.

And I remember we almost switched places because in DR, I was kind of the child that would climb trees and would question and would want to know how everything worked. But because my mother had such a sweet memory of my older sister, she was always like, "I can't wait to bring you," and kind of questioning whether she had the bandwidth to bring me. So, I was like, I want to become the best child ever. But it also meant that at that point I started really suppressing all emotion and only expressing it through my art. So it meant that whenever I had a room, I would really decorate it. Or I would draw a lot. A lot of creative expression came out of me trying to sublimate behavior so that adults would not be overwhelmed by whatever I would do. So it was this double-edged fountain [laughs]. But yes, so that meant that once we were in DR [correction: U.S. –FB], I tried to be polite and sweet and not rock anything.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Who else was there—your sister seems to have been a significant relationship growing up—were there other relationships that accompanied you in your earlier part of life?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: You know what? With her, because we would be almost like a unit that would go between my mom's place and my grandmother's place, we were always kind of treated as twins. We would be dressed alike, and it would be the bane of her existence. She was like, "I want to be an individual. Who is this person shadowing me?" And I wanted to be just like her. And it's funny because my younger sister now has two little girls and they do almost exactly the same thing. The older one is such a brilliant little baby. They did these evaluations and she was at 4 having the logic of a 12-year-old, which is great, but it also means that she's using that same logic to try to please the adults, which can be such a

tricky thing when you're trying to be acculturated.

You can't really assert your own voice if you're so hyper-aware of what everyone around you is doing and you're trying to modify your behavior to please them. So we're trying to really help her center her voice and find a balance between all that. And I'm always thinking, Juju, you have the opportunity to make good on whatever missteps we had in our growing up. You have these two beautiful, brilliant little girls. How do we help you do everything for them to be good human beings, happy human beings in the world?

And she's doing pretty good. But it's funny how strange cycles are because the younger child is this little assertive little cannonball, doing and wanting to be just like her older sister. And her older sister is this very sophisticated little thing, who just wants space for herself. So I think the strongest bond has always been with my older sister, even when we were surrounded by other cousins. And I'm sure that for her, that bond wasn't always what she wanted, but we've always been a unit.

[00:25:59]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. I always think of how interesting it would be to interview the artists and their families and their friends and everyone else.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah, why not?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Well, yeah, I would like to do that, but I'm still trying to find funds to interview just the artists [laughs]. So, as I get to the next point—

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —yeah. Maybe we should do a group conversation, one day we can have a group recording. The person will be like, "Fire, can we include your closest person?" Because I'm sure she'd be like, "No, no, no; absolutely not." Or, "What are you talking about?"

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: [Laughs].

So, I want us to talk also about what your life was like once you did move to the US, which you briefly mentioned. But I wanted to maybe open up a space for you to discuss your family's background. I know that has shown up in your work. And maybe your ancestry, or who you consider your ancestors to be, might be important to who have you become as an artist. So if you want to say more about that, you can, or we can also move on to other people.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: No, we can talk about that too, briefly. So I mentioned how my parents divorced when I was very young, and that just meant that my dad's side of the family was almost inaccessible to me growing up. The more inaccessible it became, the more I wanted to find out about it. And that almost meant trying to make a vessel from shards or trying to feel the shape of something from its absence. His side of the family is of Haitian descent. And he has several siblings. He's also maybe one of six. My grandmother had many miscarriages. So by the time he was born, he was kind of like their golden baby. And he was someone who was always—at least, it's also how you were saying I wish I had the stories from my aunts and uncles to tell me more because all the stories I have are from my mom, and of course she's the divorced ex.

But she would say how my grandmother, his mom, would always prioritize his education. And she was always trying to really do everything possible to foster his intellectual life. So when he went to school, he was the first to go to college, but also the first to have a double degree. So he was an electrical and a civil engineer. No, electrical and mechanical engineer. My mom just always emphasized how after all the sacrifices his mother made, he didn't even thank her in his graduation speech as a valedictorian. And I'm just like, Maybe he was overwhelmed. Maybe it was something. But this disconnect of his trying to reach these certain places but never really acknowledge the places he came from, was his Achilles heel in her eyes, and how that's ultimately what made him fall apart. He came back and had this position in energy in the DR.

And as you might know, in some of the—still in the Caribbean islands, energy supply is very volatile. So you might have *apagones* for hours, if not days. And so being put to manage that as a young person, he had an emotional breakdown. And I think that was around the time when they divorced. So my mom, who didn't learn to have emotional resiliency, didn't know how to give that back, and she was just destroyed by that. So, yeah, I think for me as an

adult, even with my sister trying to model different behavior, has become urgent. We've learned very much how to work our asses off. We know how to— I feel comfortable in a hurricane. I feel comfortable in crises—do I feel as comfortable in ease? Not always. I will create chaos. So learning to thrive in ease, to welcome and to create that for others, is crucial.

[00:31:14]

I think that's why so many people who work in really tough jobs when they retire, they have heart attacks. Their hearts literally cannot handle. One of the tests that they did in this thing that I went to this winter was this, it's called a heart variability test, where they attached sensors around your heart for 24 hours, and that can tell you your biological age. It tells you how resilient is your heart; how flexible is your heart. And it just showed me how much I've suppressed my heart for this whole time of trying to please adults and to navigate in a way that is not too expressive, not too anything. It literally took—I have 10 years of extra stress, I've taken 10 years out of my life, out of just stress. A healthy heart has many, many spikes, as you adapt. Mine is an even line, no matter if I'm going through joy or pain or anything. The only thing that made it really go up and down was talking to my sisters or doing yoga, which just goes to show it's not necessarily the hardcore activities. I walked up a hill at one point and my heart was extra suppressed, but moments of just connection or being able to breathe really were a moment of strength for my heart. Yeah, coming back with that is just wild because you take for granted, Oh, I've survived the worst, of course, I'm going to survive this.

But it's almost like you're wearing out your capacity to really, really survive, to really thrive. And I wish we could have more of that. So many of our elders model that. We really make it a trophy to die with labor, to work until your heart is bust. My grandfather, one of the things my mother is most proud of her dad was that he worked to death. Her great-grandmother, the mom of her mom, who was so emotionally tender—I call her tender now, but my mom is like, "She was an ineffective parent in a harsh landscape"—I've tried to get her to get more empathy for her, just really see some of those moments. But her grandmother—one of her most valued lessons were of her grandmother—[who] had the general store, and there were these delicious candies, and my mom would take candies and give them out to her classmates.

Her grandmother saw that as thievery, as robbery. And to teach her a lesson, she put her hands in a paper bag, and lit them on fire. And she was like, "From this point forward, you will never steal, and you'll never lie." And my mom was like, "It was a very harsh lesson, but I loved her for it." That's kind of a Stockholm situation, but those were the indelible lessons, and her idea of expressing love.

So now it's hard for her to receive a hug. And in that way, my older sister and I we are very much modeled after her, resilient, and do what's needed, and don't have too many frills around it. And so now as an adult, it's almost really, really difficult to go counter that. To give my mom a hug and my mom to not feel offended seems an impossibility. But, I guess, as hard as it is, we're still trying, we're trying to undo as much as we can, build from there.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, I appreciate your reflections. It's interesting that these show up a lot in previous generations of women, and sometimes the way I think about it is, sometimes your body, or your brain, or your psyche cannot actually confront the actual reason why your mother would torture you in a way, and so you find another way to give it an explanation that allows you to survive.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: That's true. Yeah.

[00:36:30]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And you actually talk a lot about survival in your work, and I think also you've spoken at length about—I don't know if these are the words you use—but also how do we stop surviving, and start actually thriving—

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —thriving, yeah. Yes.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —and enjoying, and living beyond that survival mode.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah. I mean, the point of culturation where our gifts can really be fully

unfolded is that point where you can have ease. And it's kind of funny because maybe it's not just about ease, but of being self-aware enough of your voice, because how much beauty has been created out of chaos? But how much more beauty could be created outside of that? I think it was, maybe I'm wrong, and it was a quote I think from Baldwin, of, "I really appreciate all the artistry, and all that has been created, despite enslavement, and despite the fight for freedom, but how much more would I appreciate the beauty that could come besides it, outside of it, beyond it? What other gifts have we been robbed of by having to create only as a [inaudible].If you are a hammer, then the world is only a nail. What other senses are you not even acknowledging, or able to be part of?

I'm always saying, I've always been aware of limitations, not as a bad thing, but as like, Hey, there's so much more! As much as we see, if we just think that our being is the end-all, be-all, then we limit how much more we can see. Really de-centering, really actively being welcome to more, to all. And that can sometimes be really good and really bad. Not being so burnt by the bad that you stop your search for something else or appreciation of something else. Which is easy enough to say, but I think maybe some of the things that my harsh great-grandmother—her lessons—did for my mom is that it allowed her to go beyond her circle. She was the first child to leave the country. Her great-grandmother, I think was a Spanish immigrant, or might've been her mother, two grandmothers before that. And it's kind of funny, because even those immigrants that were brought at that point to *blanquear la frontera*—there were these efforts to bring in peasants from Spain to somehow become a barrier—and even those peasants carried a certain level of generational wealth, that they were granted land for free. They were given certain things that were not necessarily given to people who were already born in the island. And so, by the time my great-grandmother was born, she could have the general store, she could essentially control certain goods within the town. By the time my grandmother was born, that was already eroded by the time my—because my great-great-grandmother, being a part of patriarchy, she had maybe, I think, six daughters and one son, and the son was a baby, and she left all her things to the son to then take care of his sisters.

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The son and his wife sold everything, didn't tell the siblings, and moved to the capital. Their children had very comfortable lives. They were educated abroad, they became doctors, et cetera, and none of the siblings knew that the land they lived in, they were essentially squatting in, that none of the wealth was theirs because the brother didn't tell them until he was in his deathbed. That meant that then all the children of all the daughters grew up with none of those comforts, and so by the time my mom was born, they didn't have any of those comforts. That's why she had to go work in another town by the time she was 12, as a teacher.

But it also meant that she was able to have the volition and will to just find ways of not being limited by that legacy. So going and working in the capital, and leaving the country, doing all these different things, to basically take care of, not just her children, but her family, extended family. She became the breadwinner for her siblings in a sense. As you can tell, I have great admiration, but also great hesitance, you know, not taking it fully as one thing.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. I wanted us to transition a little bit to when your mom was able to bringyou and your sister to the US. When I'm interviewing artists who've had a background in migration, I see that as an important moment of departure. So if you can talk more about what that meant for you, moving to a different space.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah. So I remember, we were a little bit prepared, we were getting ready to move to the States, and my sister and I would pretend-talk English, by just speaking Spanish with a very strong American accent, *Por-que vam-mos a los Ea-esta-dous Unidos ahora. Oh, sabes que? Vamos a los Estados Unidos* [mimics a strong accent in Spanish][Laughs]. So that was our speaking English. And then, which meant we were completely unprepared when we did come to the States. And we briefly landed in New York in the fall, and my older sister was in such shock, she was just in her coat forever.

But it also meant that we experienced winter, and Halloween, and certain things in New York City that my mother was just like, "Not my children." She was just so terrified. There was a point where they were putting needles in apples, or—there were scary things. So her introduction to Halloween to us was to screen *Carrie*, the original, to a second-grader. And I'm just like, We already have such a karmic load as a mother and daughter, why would you

add this movie to it? Where they struggled with their menses, where the mother is this [inaudible] terrified of the world, and trying to put that through her daughter, and then her daughter lashing out. I'm like, "I don't want to do this, I don't want to be this scared person in the world."

But yes, so *Carrie*, that's why I can't really watch that movie now. But also, that was her extreme fear of Halloween, of American alternate culture. Then after that year, we moved to Miami, and our welcome to Miami was Hurricane Andrew. We were basically caught in this housing scheme. She put all her life savings, she had been working as a nurse practitioner, and all her life savings, she put to have a down payment for a house in Florida. And unbeknownst to her, my stepdad had put us into a housing scheme, where they were putting us on houses that were in between being sold. So we'd be in a house for two months, and be like, "No, no, next house. No, no, no, next house." Until she realized that all her savings were depleted, and we didn't have a house.

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Those were the first few years of us being in Miami. But when we first came, and we're in this house, with Hurricane Andrew on us, my eldest sister was livid. She's like, "How could you put us in this precarity? Why would you do this to us?" She was panicking, and crying, and yelling, and my mom just slapped her and was like, "Get it together. What are you worrying about?" And I was like, "Check." And I just went to sleep. I found a corner and went to sleep until the storm passed.

So in terms of fight or flight, I just went deep, deep, deep inside, and my sister was like, "Fight." So during the pandemic even, she's been in COVID wards the whole time. She's in ICU, she can save a life. If your head's still attached, she can keep your pulse going. But she's very much like my mom. She's someone who will work and find purpose in work. For all of us. We can find our moment of zen in work, but when that space is not there, that frenzy is not there, it's very hard to find purpose, or to be in flow with the world.

So now I just—I think of her like my twin—how do I get her to a moment of balance again? I'm going to try to go in May on a long vacation with her, and it might fall apart, but we're going to try. Because she hasn't taken a break, it's been how long since COVID shut down the world, and opened up again? And she's been dealing with that non-stop. So I'll report to you in June.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. I'd love to hear more about how you, and your family, and your reality shifted during COVID. And I actually wanted to ask you more about that for our other recording. And for this recording, I'm hoping we can also talk about—you briefly mentioned this—and then I moved on to a different topic, but you had mentioned you starting to create things when you were in the Dominican Republic, and before that, using crayons. Can you talk about your creativity, and how it started showing up in your childhood, and how that developed?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah, so in the Dominican Republic, it wouldn't be environments [yet –FB] We'd be outside, and we'd create cities out of sticks and mud, and just built different structures. We were little architects. I remember at one point we'd collect whole palm fronds, and you know those can be 13 feet long. So imagine a little four-year-old traipsing through the woods, carrying all these materials. And I still have this scar right here, as a child, where I went to pick up a branch, and there was a glass, and it just went right there [makes sound and mimics something cutting the palm of her hand]. But it shows me the size of my hand at the moment because this little thing that is half an inch long was [half –FB] the length of my hand at that time.

So I can navigate times in my life according to the scars in my body, and it's usually me playing, or climbing, or doing things like that. Because [Loma –FB] was a mountainous area, and sometimes not so developed, they started putting in these drains on the road, like these five feet wide tubes to create trenches so that the roads wouldn't collapse and they would just drain onto the sides. And oh my goodness, I remember falling from trees, and rolling onto those, and then maybe building things in those [laughs]. So this impulse for creating things, to make cities, or just magic fairy mounts, things like that. My sister and I remember all the cousins getting our things. I remember as little girls, we were given these little—still working—toy pots. There's this brand that—it's funny because even like Palmolive we would say *pal-mo-lí-ve.* They would have these brands, IMUSA, these—they're zinc or tin, or—these

pots that are the standard use in DR, and a lot of places.

[00:51:25]

I think when I went to Southwestern Mexico, they had them too. The IMUSA pots that are actually technically really unhealthy for you, just like some *Grecas* instead of using them to cook, we'd be using them as molds for our architecture mounds. So the freedom to not just mimic a certain behavior, but to be able to find other purposes and make despite that. So we were always creating fortresses, and cities, and things like that. When I came to the US, and living in more urban spaces, my room, whatever was my corner spot, that became a place of invention, and I would always try to create these—do you know the artist, Yvette [Mayorga] . She currently has a show adjacent to mine at The Momentary, but she makes these super girly pink spaces, that are someone's suburban fantasy, but it's a hyper-real suburban fantasy because you're in all these other things. So I'd always make rooms like that as a little girl. I turned the roughest, to the most girly thing ever, and then going from those moments to other moments of fantasy, like other geographies, other—like I think of those blue installations I do now, and the precursors to those oceanscapes, were my rooms. I would build them out, and to be anything like that.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And how did that continue to show up in your education, or as you were growing up in the United States, and started going to school?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: So, I actually went to a different school for every year, which was very destabilizing. But part of the public education system was this idea of training you to be a well-behaved human. Rather than it being about education, about you learning something, it's, if you said yes, and please, and thank you well enough, if you're quiet enough, then you were just promoted to the next grade. Which meant I never learned fractions. I never learned some of the foundational things, but I was really well-behaved enough that I just wanted to escape the world. The adults just took that as, All right, fine. She's ready to be in the world. She's not going to raise a ruckus.

So I was always escaping to art classes. I was always the one making the school poster, or if there was a drawing that the class needed, I'd be asked to do it. Wherever I would go, I would try to find the afterschool program. My mom was working really hard, so it's not like she could take us to afterschool programs, but she never actively blocked us from doing things. So, she said, "If you can find a way to get there, and you can find a way to fund it, you can do it." So that meant that I was actively always looking for free school programs or ways I could stay—if school ended at 02:30, if I could stay until 06:00—and just keep drawing, I'd do my homework. I'd always be reading a book. I remember, and I'm still so jealous that I could do this, but we'd be in the car, and I'd be reading, I'd have my books.

As soon as I learned to drive, that stopped. I could not handle [moving –FB] space in the same way, but I could read a book almost until it was very dark. I'd hide under blankets and try to read. I was either hiding in books, or drawing. And I think that's probably why my mom always took that as me being too introverted, so she'd always go in and—I would always collect books from the book fairs. I would love those book fairs—I would save whatever money I could babysitting, and just buy all the books I could. And she would be a travel nurse at one point, and she would bring these smutty romance novels, and try to hide the covers.

[00:56:07]

And I remember as a 12-year-old finding, and being like, *Escandaloso!* Let me keep reading this [laughs]. And just starting collecting the books that were probably meant for the substitute teachers, all the romance novels, they would just sell it to me in middle and elementary school. And just reading all the Goosebumps, all The Baby-Sitters Club, and then doing romance novels, I was like, Jesus. And then the teachers being like, "As long as you're reading, it's all right. It doesn't matter if it's smut, just keep reading." And the things that teachers have to handle, it's just unconscionable, the level of the lack of support that there is. So at one point—no, no, go ahead.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I was just going to ask you if, by the time you were in high school, were you also moving around from school to school?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah, actually, when you're in junior high in Miami, you get to choose where you go for your senior year.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Oh, okay.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: So those are the two years where I actually could stay, and that's what I stayed in Jackson Senior High School from junior to senior year. And I was a captain of the art club. It was funny, I remember I was in AP Art, and I got the congressional award, or something like that, and that meant I got to go to D.C. So I have this photo of me with a local congresswoman holding my little certificate. And part of getting that was a $5,000 scholarship to Savannah, to SCAD. My teacher was like, "Yes, you did it." And I'm like, "Jenkins, this won't even cover the meals. This won't even cover anything. So that's not viable, I can't assume debt like that. My mom won't even be able to sign Pell Grants or anything like that. She's not going to help me with financial aid, she's not going to co-sign any loans."

So that meant that, outside of all that excitement, it just seemed unviable. So I went to the local community college. And there, they had a pretty decent—Miami-Dade had a really decent art program—they actually formally became a college, Miami-Dade College, instead of a community college. I wonder if that changed any of the funding. But they also had a consortium with the sisters schools, the Five Sisters in the Northeast. Some of the programs I did there, let me take a tour of the Five Sisters, and I was like, Okay, maybe this could be a possibility. Mount Holyoke and that [student –FB] bell sounded so exciting.

But at the same time, in one of the art electives, they told me about Cooper, which was tuition-free at the time. And they didn't say it was really difficult [to get into –FB]—they were just like, it's a free school in New York, you might as well try. And that was the key that opened up my world. Without that program, and without having the transition from an unstructured education—it basically helped me get a foundation for even just being able to navigate academia. How do you write an essay? If you don't have a foundation in fractions, how do you use a calculator to answer all these questions? How do you go through statistics if you don't have any of that? And because I've always been someone who was a good student, I can navigate and bear through it. The grit of growing up with my mom, and being a good student helped me figure a way of adapting. But Good Lord! I don't think I would've survived the Five Sisters. I wouldn't have had the rigor, or the foundation for anything like that.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And so just going back to these formative years before you got into Cooper, are there any, or can you think of any people that were around you trying to guide you in this path? Or how was that for you in forming this path towards your career?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: You know, middle school and elementary school were very traumatic, to the point where I don't remember much about them. I have vague memories of—Oh my goodness, it's kind of funny how we remember the crisis points, rather than the moments of ease. But I remember once we went to one Cuban white-passing school, where—I was in the ESOL classes—but for some reason, I think they were Cuban and Argentinian, but these little girls just really, really had it out for me. My mom has *pelo lacio,* it's wavy and *lacio* and she couldn't deal with my sister and my curly hair, so she would just always give us these little tomboy cuts. She's like, "So neat, so tidy." We're like, "Mommy, they're calling us *maria machito*, what the hell?" [Laughs].

[01:01:55]

It didn't translate, but it also made us a target for bullies at school. My older sister was always hyper-feminine, and self-aware, she could always make it look cute. I was always inside, so I didn't really pay attention to what my appearance was. And I had developed much too soon, so it meant that second grade, I already had a C, D cup, and so these little girls were calling me the most obese, the most grotesque thing ever. And I look at photos at that time, and I'm like, I was just a normal kid with actual boobs. If I had been anything like a show-off, I could have been like, "Yes, I've got boobs. If I had some level of self-awareness, I could have rejoiced in my body, instead of being ashamed and hiding them.

But it got to the point of the crescendo where I had to—they went as a group to beat me up, and I fought back—and I'm like, What could have led to that point of them—I guess you have the Henry Miller, Yellow Bird. You understand that there's group mentality that can make targets happen, but it just seemed so bizarre. Cause I was always the quiet, trying to be nice, in the corner situation, which of course, is probably the right target. So, at that point, I had to go to the principal's office, I had been fighting. My mother was called in, and she took

me out of the school, which was, academically, a far superior school—had a lot of resources—and then we went to Brownsville Elementary School, where it was predominantly Black and Latino, but it was mostly Haitian and African American.

And in that school, I felt like I was able to thrive more. I had teachers who were more generous, who took time to talk to you. The afterschool program, the art classes were better. But I think I was just going through so much stress, I don't even want to cry, but through all those, I had Bell's Palsy several times, and that's usually associated with stress. So can you imagine going through all that with half your face paralyzed? I was like, Jesus [tears up].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Do you want to take a minute? Or how are you doing?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Sure, maybe a drink.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay. I'll take some too.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: In that school in Brownsville, they actually told us of this other magnet art class in South Miami High School. And in that middle school, I found two best friends, and they actually saw me reading a book in a stairwell, and were like, We want—It's like Uncle Sam, like, "We want you." They recruited me into the trio, and that was how we became friends. It was Pablo and Estrelia, they joined me in the afterschool art programs, and we would do this thing where I would have—that was the one time I asked my mom to drive me—University of Miami used to have nude drawing classes, and anyone could come in.

[01:06:00]

And so, I would always take—she would just drive me to the train—and there was a Metromover station that would take you right to the campus. And I would love just being able to draw. And there'd be adults with their equipment, they would just have the furniture ready for you and you just draw. And Pablo and Estrelia were not about that life, so I was like, Guys, you have to join me. It's the best classes ever. You get to draw. And there's everybody there.

And they were so shocked by seeing the nude figure. They're called "sawhorses" or I forget what they're—but essentially, it's this thing you sit on and you put your drawing pad on and you draw asyou look. They were so shocked by the nude model that they backed up and tumbled a whole mountain of those. But despite that shock, they did follow me into another school that had art classes and were able to join, and I was able to have them [as friends there –FB].

They were kind of like the trio with me through three different school moves, and they ended up in Jackson with me. That was really great. So in terms of bond, yeah, I forgot that it started in middle school in that Brownsville. If it hadn't been for those bullies, I would never have met Pablo and Estrelia, and had someone to be with me in these different schools. Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And can you say more? You were starting to talk about Cooper Union and what that meant for the doors that opened up to you. Can you say more about that period of your life?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah. So being in New York, my mom and sisters are all in Miami, it meant really having to develop an independent sense of self and survive on my own, which to them just seemed like absolute insanity like, Why would you live in such a harsh city with all the ugly brown, and the light going dark, and all this?

But if it hadn't been for art, honestly, the access to museums and to studio spaces and residencies, that art had been a literal life force, like a lifesaver for me. It helped me express emotions in a way that I wasn't able to, or allowed to in the world as a norm. So it just felt like finally being able to breathe, finally being able to do this thing that brought me so much joy.

Even though I had to have, for the most part of living here, five jobs at a time at one point. I remember there was even one year where I moved seven times at once, and it's just ridiculous. I've lost so much art. And commuting from one job to the other and being so tired that I'd forget my portfolio in the subway, or storing materials in someone's basement and having that basement flood and having all the material—so there's a lot of, when I talked

about creativity being this fountain, the only resilience I could find is if I had the capacity to make it once, I can make it again. And hopefully, the muses will visit me again and I can keep, you know, having this thing be expressible. But yes, so despite all the harshness, despite the instability, that has always been such a point of joy and freedom that I've stayed here.

It wasn't until maybe five years ago that I was self-sustained enough for my mother to calm down a little bit. And it's kind of funny because as a young person, a lot of the advice that she gave me was extremely sound. It made complete sense. But if you don't have the means, it makes no sense the right advice on the wrong environment, and without the means, it might as well be a foreign language. So, there are talks of women artists and the sacrifices that they have to make. You either have to choose having a child or having your career. Or you can choose to have a partner, but then lose focus, et cetera, et cetera. All these different things that are, the environment isn't there to even help or foster.

[01:11:05]

There's all these other countries, like being in Germany or in Denmark, they have these programs that reward you for being a parent. You don't have just maternal leave for two years, you have paternal leave for a year. So a couple, potentially, can have three years to fully focus on child-rearing. The first formative years, they can spend it anywhere in the world. If they want to spend that year in any country, they can go there. And then have the security of a job, or the security of retraining if you want to have another job. The fact that that just seems like an extreme luxury in the US is just so bizarre. Or that the answer in the US is not like to reward parenting, but to kind of force it. To ban abortions in a way that will increase the population, but with no inkling of how that population will grow or how to create a healthier, equipped populace, just seems very deliberate, but also very violent.

So growing up, she was like—I remember my sophomore year of college, she was like, "You should freeze your eggs. It looks like you're not getting married anytime soon. You're a *jamona* [laughs], you should think about it." I'm like, Mom, that's $20,000 a year. Where am I going to get that? I can barely get financial aid. I have five jobs to try to pay my measly rent. You know? But of course, with the resources, that would've been the perfect advice. That would've been the right time to do that. Or even you should focus on having—her goal has always been to find a way to get health insurance. Without your health, there is no foundation. Which, of course, is absolutely right. But if the only way to get health is to get a desk position that, basically, takes all the time away from you being able to have a studio practice. Where you come home and you're so depleted that you have, not only the energy but the imagination to express yourself, then that felt like robbery. So then, to be a practicing artist meant not having health insurance, not having security in many, many ways. Not being able to think of yourself as an individual within—in relation—or to viably have relationships.

It just seems like a very tough thing, but being such an introvert was maybe the perfect thing for me. It just seemed like the rewards of being able to have a rich interior world seemed like a good balance. It's just, it's such a high price to demand for that exchange. And so now I'm as with somewhat of stability, trying to find ways of finding equilibrium. But I wish as a society it wasn't up to the individual, that we did have things in place to care for each other.

[Doorbell sounds]

There's the doorbell. Let's pause for a second. Let me get that.

[Pause]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: You were talking about all the difficulties and the sacrifices—

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —precarity of being a practicing artist in New York City?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yes [laughs].

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Oh, my God. Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: But say more about that. So, once you moved to New York, you actually started taking—or I guess not taking, but preparing to make that your career and

actually trying to navigate all that—

[Crosstalk]

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —yeah, it just seemed like the only option. I think people who veered from being an artist is almost like they had a bounty of gifts and they could become anything they wanted. So a lot of people became librarians or archivists, or it's almost like they grew up with a certain expectation of comfort. So then it was just the roughness, the absolute destruction of being an artist was like, they didn't have to do that to themselves. They could just do something else. They could choose.

[01:15:50]

For me, it just felt like there is no other option. I could have a desk job and be miserable. I could become a nurse. I could be proficient in many, many things. I could do them well, but I wouldn't be joyous. It wouldn't necessarily make me feel fully expressive or like a human being. I was an administrative assistant at one point after graduating from Cooper, in their high school outreach program. And at that point, I was the most gainfully employed out of my friends. I had health insurance, I could sign the deposit for our apartment in the Bronx. We had a very spacious apartment where five of us lived, the rent was like $300. It was unheard of for such a nice-looking apartment. This was 2005, 2006. And they relied on me to sign the lease, because I was gainfully employed.

But that just meant that I was out for the count. And I was trying my hardest. I was trying to make as much as I could within that time. It was actually during the same period—at the end of that employment— I made the Natural Grooming Series, these very tightly-rendered drawings. Cooper had been very much about abstraction, making very formal decisions and choices that were not about identity. It seemed like I wasn't able to express or really center the places and people I loved. So talking about race within the Dominican Republic, or the intersectionality of race and identity within both the Caribbean and the United States, the overlaps and the differences just seemed like, "Ugh, why are you even talking about this?" And so, part of my education post-Cooper was learning to divest myself from the things that hindered my voice and really re-appreciate the things that were helping within that. So, to really untangle the hierarchies that were built into the education at Cooper and make choices that I felt were my own.

So then I did the most figurative work I could ever think of, at a time when it was still very much about abstraction. And now we kind of revel in figuration and have these moments of, Of course, the figure. Why not? But at that point, it just seemed very taboo. So I made these really tenderly-rendered portraits of women within natural hair communities. Reveling in their hair, but also bringing in some of the stories that I had grown up with as a child. Some of the things that they would try to press on us to try to do a certain level of self-grooming to seem to pass within society. So, they would always tell us—if your hair is so tangled, or so unkempt, birds will come and make nests out of them, "*van a hacer un nido.*" The worst thing that could happen to you as a human soul was to have your hair taken by a bird and incorporated into a nest in the sky because you'd be stuck in limbo between heaven and earth. You'd have no agency. And almost a bit like remnants of someone's idea of Voudun or natural spirits taking a part of your soul. This idea that every part of your body is inherently connected to your soul.

So, always being self-aware, first of all, but also in full respect of other actors or agents within the environment that had the ability to create equilibrium or unbalance. Which was always funny, because in the US, birds were things you manipulated [in fairytales –FB]. They were things in cages or princesses had them do their will, like Aurora, or Cinderella, et cetera. They were things, not entities in the world, not beings. So I grew up with a very strong understanding of things [beings –FB] in nature having their own will and volition and being mindful and respectful of that.

[01:20:54]

But where was I before that? Oh, yes. So, the story—the drawings are these grisaille portraits of these women with these birds kind of picking at their hair and nesting and making do. But one thing that I didn't realize at the time when I was making them, and then looking at the work of someone like Amy Sherald, makes me more aware of, is that I was always conscientious of keeping them at a specific gray balance. And not having a

chiaroscuro be too, too dark or too, too light. It was about how you navigate as a person who exists in between different racial spaces. So, they were like silverpoint drawings trying to explore race. And I remember before I did that series, I had been looking at the work of someone like Ellen Gallagher or Kara Walker. And that expression was always within the language of minstrelsy or of certain visual lexicons from Southern American traditions that had valence here but didn't speak to a broader diaspora. It didn't include imagery within Latin America, the Caribbean, or Brazil.

Of course, those had an effect there. But there were other things like Casta Paintings that were endemic to our understanding of a smile, or the width or the bridge of a nose. All those things were codified. So I wanted to bring or acknowledge that codification into the figuration, even the curl of the hair, anything like that. So those drawings were the beginning of trying to merge both spaces.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Did you start bringing in these new parts of your practice once you were already at the MFA?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: They were before.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Or can you say a little bit more about how that transition happened?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I actually started doing that after Cooper, so two years to kind of learn and unlearn what I valued, or finding my voice after that point. Cooper was almost like, if you could be an art jock, that was it. I didn't think I was going to be able to do art, so getting to Cooper felt like having the keys to the kingdom handed to me. I will learn every technique. It's a bit like a Bauhaus, where you're not allowed to declare a major, so you have to try every medium. So I would do film and video and sculpture and design and book binding.

The person who had recruited me at Miami at one of the portfolio fairs was the head of the printmaking department, Day Gleeson, which meant that I felt like I owed allegiance to Day, every day. And I came to love the printmaking department. The printmaking and paper department became my second home. And so I would try to revel in, if not master, because I really sucked at editioning. I love the techniques. I loved drawing on a litho stone and being able to print that. But if you asked me to make 30 exact copies, I'd be like, “I'm here to be an artist, not a printer” It was one of the lessons that she always would emphasize with us, I'm here to make you guys artists, not master printers. And I took it to heart. But yeah, I don't think it was for the purpose that she meant. It was just because I really couldn't have the heart to edition well. So I was exploring a lot of the ideas that I still work on now in some of that work, even though it was as a counter.

One of the first map pieces that I ever did was in a [sculpture –FB] critique class, freshman year at Cooper, where I painted out the map of the island of Hispaniola in the classroom floor. And I had the steps to bachata on one side and konpa on the other. And my classmates were meant to follow the steps and embody the movement from one space to the other. And really feel how, even though there were supposed to be two separate geographies, there were so many similarities between them. Just to try to find a way of not just intellectually learning about a history, but to move and enact, and be part of it. And I was destroyed [in that critique –FB]. And I probably didn't explain it well enough, but the classroom was just like, "Ugh" [laughs].

[01:26:17]

And at that same time I collaborated with a classmate, Alex Campaz. We did this blue room installation and I still do these blue tarp installations. But I remember we covered a room in banana leaves, the same leaves that you would wrap tamales with, and we hung the whole layer of *plátanos*, green. So the room started as this very green space and humid. We had these humidifiers going behind, hidden in spaces, and the floor was also covered in green leaves.

But underneath the green leaves were these red tracks, fluorescent tracks. And so it felt like plowed lines or volcanic lines in the ground. And as the room ripened, it became a yellow room and then a spotted yellow and brown room. And then when it became very, very black, the fruits were just black. It's like when the fruit is the ripest and the perfect *plátano maduro*. We did a cookout and we had fried plantains that we all ate together. hat room [installation –FB] was more accepted. I think people, for me and Alex, it was a question of agrarian

practices, the strange fruit [of Americana –FB]. What are these hanging bodies? What are the sacrifices you make within these landscapes for economic exchange? What is sustenance? What is tradition? There were a lot of things that were embedded within that piece that our classmates could choose to engage or not. They would be like, "Oh, Ana Mendieta light," or etcetera. I guess the level of ambiguity made it palatable in a way that the map, with its directness about the relations between two different populations, just seemed like a bit too much. So there were things, despite the pushback, I was trying out different things at Cooper that were, over time, elaborated differently, and will still try it out now.

Natural Grooming [series], all that was before grad school. After I started the Natural Grooming Series, I applied to and I got into Skowhegan. And after that point, I decided to apply to grad school. And I had been applying to all these different places, like Columbia and Yale, et cetera. But at that time, the stories were like, it's about $50,000 a semester. There are very few scholarships. What they hadn't told me at the time was that if you got into Yale at that point, the endowment was such that if your parents earned under a certain amount, you essentially had tuition-free education. But I didn't know that.

So, I was just like, If I don't get in the first time, I'm not doing this, because I cannot be indentured to debt after this. I'm not going to have anyone be able to shoulder that besides me. And still working five jobs to try to pay for my really inexpensive room, and inexpensive lifestyle, seemed like already too much.

When I got into Hunter, I was like, "I could pay for this. I can do this on my own." I think the tuition was something like $1,500 a semester, in comparison. And they had really amazing professors and it was still within the city. Essentially, it was [the same as –FB] paying for a studio. It was like the Thunderdome, in the middle of Midtown, and you could do anything. And that was a chance—Nari Ward really, really helped me loosen up my language, loosen up some of the things that—at Cooper there was a really, especially in the print-making department, a very strong emphasis on archivability. Your work had to live or be viable for at least a hundred years after you. You should always know what was light-fast, what materials were going to hold, what chemical processes were going to be workable. And so that meant that I could go into a space of experimentation at Hunter with a full understanding of what all those rules were, and break things in a way that loosened and made them more rigorous conceptually. But, also, still please my geeky Cooper heart, of being able to say, This painting looks really experimental, but it's still fat over lean. It is still something that's not going to crack if it's rolled. Or it's not going to do all these different things that you would think.

[01:31:36]

Who was it? I think it was de Kooning who would add mayo to his paintings. And that, if you think about it, is a bit like tempera. It would be an egg-based paint substrate, but if it's not in the right balance, you're still going to get cracks. There's still a lot of things that if you look at something like Manet's paintings or the Romantics—I forget the name of them, but the British neo-medievalists, they used to use so much zinc that all their surfaces are cracked. Manet couldn't paint hands, so he would over-labor them with zinc-based paint, and the hands are all cracked. And so, one thing that Nari then told me was, "You know what? You're making a job for a conservator. Stop worrying so much about how this work will survive. Just think of what is going to be the strongest work you can make. What's the strongest expression of that, that you can do? And then someone else can figure [the rest out –FB]—if you make a mistake, it's not the end of the world. Someone else will have a job. If they can spend hundreds of thousands in trying to recreate a Pollock cigarette [which] he probably dropped in by mistake, they can figure out how to balance out your paper. So you're good. "And so, that felt like a moment of freedom that I didn't have. To just be like, "All right, let's just make. Let's make things and think more of what's the breadth. What's the longest extension of them?" And not be so stuck on materiality.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you for saying more about that. I'm glad we're able to cover so much. It is such a challenge to cover so much in not such a long time, but thank you so much for trying to tackle all of these different areas of your life.

And what you just mentioned seems so important, that you were able to put your attention towards more of the content and what you were connected to. And then have people, like me, archive your oral history, so you'll still be in the future.

I wanted us to talk more about your career, which has really come to be and been exposed in the last decade or so, after you graduated from Hunter. And so, I wanted to have enough time for you to tell me— maybe not go through all of your exhibitions because, of course, you've had several solo and group exhibitions that have been very important. But for you, what have been important opportunities? Or, again, these moments where you felt you were transitioning to a different space in your practice?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah. I think the first point, was right around the time between Skowhegan and Hunter happened, so they almost overlapped. It was a summer of Skowhegan and then, in the fall, I was already at Hunter. And having the exposure at Skowhegan—it was also a very rough summer. It's kind of funny because I have a lot of founders or the board of Skowhegan will [ask], "How was your Skowhegan summer?" And there are some people who have magic, loving summers where they all end up wanting to live in the same house in New York together.

My summer, mind you, I wouldn't trade this for the world—I had people who I am still friends with, and it was a moment where I started so many different series. The *Ciguapa* series started there. The Can I Pass? Series, it started in that summer. There's usually a critical mass that residencies need for it to not become cliquey or for things to not become—there are certain things that happen if the balance isn't right. They were fixing a house while I was a resident. That meant that our numbers were low. Lower by, I don't know, 20 people less than they would regularly have. And it was a very wet summer. So that meant there were a lot of cranky people with duckage. Have you ever heard of duckage before? It's this thing that happens in lakes, in warm shores, where duck poop will just accumulate. So if you wade into the lake, you suddenly developed these horrible body rashes. So there were young art people walking around in discomfort being mean to each other.

[01:36:32]

But outside of all that, there was a lot of great work and people that I still know and artists I admire. Even though I'm like, [quite literally –FB], I know what you did that summer. A crucial mass or having the right amount [can make all the difference –FB].

[Connection loss]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay, so there-

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —[continues throught] how crucial it is to have the right amount of people in our group for the dynamics to be loving and friendly. Guadalupe Maravilla was in that summer. And it was the perfect weather, dry and people could just be happy. And I think 10 people in his year all moved into one house together because they loved each other so much. So that's the difference that the environment and the right numbers can do when it's just the right balance.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And then, right after that you started your graduate school?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yes. And so, right after that, I was at Hunter. The freedom of Skowhegan made me receptive to the advice of someone like Nari Ward, to be like, "You know, this is a place to really experiment and find your voice. You have all these different techniques. Let's find out what you want to say." And so that was it. Just—it was also at a point where the campus of Hunter was in Midtown West, in this kind of derelict building that because it was so—the rules were a little bit looser, so you felt like you could make anything. Like you could perform and do sculpture and do all these different things because the architecture allowed for it. It was almost like the free-range kid that learns to make toys out of anything, and his imagination flourishes because of that because you're not being hovered over or really being groomed into something else. You get to be yourself. And I really appreciated that.

And then after grad school, the whole thing of, how do I find a studio in New York City, this expensive, expensive city, how do I do that? And so right after Hunter, I got a Joan Mitchell Award, and that honestly saved my life. With that $15,000, I was able to fund my whole studio practice and find a place to live, and get materials. Somehow artists are able to stretch out the dollar. I remember before, my annual budget on a good year was like $11,000 or $12,000, so I knew I could make it.

And so after the Joan Mitchell award, I got into the LMCC [workspace –FB] Studio Program, and that meant a [free –FB] studio for 11 months. And that was such a blessing because, for

an introvert like myself, part of the benefit of something like grad school and residencies, it meant that I could make my work and people would come to me instead of me having to—I would be destroyed by having to go to openings or to socialize, literally would get a sore throat and a hurting tummy [stomach aches –FB]or all these different [somatic –FB] things that are just like, Deal Firelei [laughs]! But yeah, in LMCC I could have curators and friends and there would be open studios.

And so from that residency forward, I was almost hooked on residencies. I've done every possible residency out there, as long as it was a not-for-fee residency. Our work is already enough labor. We bring in, as artists, things to these spaces that we also then shouldn't have to be spending $10,000, $6,000 just to be a fellow. And there are really incredible residencies that don't require that of you. Some of my favorite ones are the Headlands Residency in California. It seemed like such a respite and it weirdly reminded me of my childhood landscape, like this ocean scape and mountains all together, and the mistiness. So I always felt really like it was such a generative space, the times that I was able to go to that residency.

[01:41:28]

There's been a lot, and some that I wish I had been able to do when I first started. So after Cooper, I remember I applied for the AIM, Artist in the Marketplace in the Bronx. I was like, I'm a Bronxite, this would be great. Just how do I figure out how to be an artist in the world? And I remember I got a letter back basically telling me, "You need more time to cook. You're too raw right now. We can't help you." And I was like, ah! that would've been the perfect time." Because by the time I got the residency, I already had— through trials and many, many burns and bumps—figured out how to do what they were basically teaching. I was too developed for them by the time that they thought I was worthy of being in the program. So I wish they would recalibrate and get a few more green shoots in there. But that's kind of the balance of art residencies in New York.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And I know we could talk at length about how accessible these spaces can be and how much we need to have more spaces to support people through their development. I do want to, though, transition to talking about your exhibitions and just opportunities in terms of exposure of your work that you think would be important to document.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Absolutely. So around that same time, Rocío Aranda-Alvarado and Elvis Fuentes, and Trinidad Fombella—were creating *The (S) Files* in the El Museo del Barrio. And that was my first group exhibition that made a big difference. I remember Holland Cotter reviewed it and had a very brief shout-out to my Can I Pass series. It's kind of funny because I would always just be too shy to be in the openings for some of these things. Even in the Hunter open studios, I'd be terrified. So I would just leave my room open to anyone to come in and go see other people's artwork, which is probably not the safest practice to do, especially with art. But that also meant that for a lot of these other significant group exhibitions, I was probably too nervous to be at the opening.

Let's see. Rocío did a lot of really great group exhibitions that I felt were really formative for my work. There's one in particular that I remember in Ramapo College. What was the title of it? [Boundless Discourse]. But she had my work next to someone like Cybil [Vladimir Cybil]. —a lot of other artists that I felt were very important and that I didn't know of. And that once I did, I was like, Wow, this is the full range of what other work can be.

And then there was a Caribbean exhibition [Caribbean: Crossroads of the World] that traveled to the Perez Museum in Miami. And in the original iteration, I hadn't been part of it, but then I was included in the one at the Perez. And at that point, around 2013—so, 2012 I was in the Headlands. 2013, I got into the Fine Arts Work Center Residency in Massachusetts —and it was at the time of that horrible, I don't know if it was Noah or Jonah, super winter bomb storm that essentially was creating three-foot icicles outside my door. I had to kick my door from the snow and walk up to the studio upstairs. And I remember being like, Oh my God, please bless me with sunlight next year. This can't be. And so at that point, Maria Elena [Ortiz] was a curator in the Perez Museum where the Caribbean exhibition, had been traveling. And I think someone dropped out of a panel and they were like, "Hey Firelei, would you be open to coming to do this panel for the exhibition?" And I was like, Sunlight? Caribbean folk? Yes!

[Between these two events, I was part of Prospect 3 in New Orleans in 2014 –FB]

So I went there and really got along with Maria Elena, we really connected. And I went back to Massachusetts. And a few months later she she sent me a formal letter saying, "Would you consider doing a solo show with us in Miami?" I was like, Look at God manifesting a whole year of sunlight and being close to my family. So then that following year, I was talking to someone—I had actually gone to the Theaster Gates' Black Artist Retreat in Chicago and a lot of us artists were inspired, and we tried to do mini B.A.R.S, mini retreats in our cities. And so in one of those mini-meetings, Saya Woolfalk was part of my group, and we were on a subway ride back and I was like, Hey, Zaya, I was invited to Miami and I'm so excited. Or, I was invited to do this show, but I don't know how I would even have a studio in Miami.

[01:47:21]

She is such a savvy artist, she's so brilliant. She was like, "Why don't you ask them to relocate their shipping budget to production, and see if you can just have that pay for your studio?" Best advice anyone's given me in my life, because then Maria Elena was open to that, and with that shipping money, I was able to find a studio space. And it was the biggest studio I've ever had, to date, still now. The ceilings were so high. And I was able to make all the work for the Perez, and basically be in discourse with Maria Elena for an entire year. She could see the works developing and she could choose according to what was in process. She could develop her writing based of our weekly conversations. It was such an ideal time and space in terms of our production.

In terms of real life, it was so brutal. I was having this idyllic thing of, I'm finally going to be able to reconnect with my family after 10 years of being away, or more. We can heal karmic wounds, whatever. Big mistake. I was living with my mom and my younger sister. My younger sister had just divorced. My mom and her were living together. And I was like, I'm going to be responsible. I'm going to give them my whole year's rent all at once at the beginning of the year, and then I'm not going to have to worry about it. one of us have any financial literacy. Five months in, all the money I had given her for the year's rent was gone.

At that point, my mom was giving me pressure. I was like, Mom, this is the most important exhibition of my life. This can be a very transformative thing to do.

So then, at that time, she didn't understand. My favorite time to work as an artist is from 5:00 PM to 5:00 AM. There's no phone ringing. There's no one bothering you. You can just be fully focused. But for her, it was like I was having the most derelict schedule. She's someone who wakes up punctually at 5:30 in the morning. She's ready to roll and work at five in the morning. I'd be getting home around 5:00, dead on my feet, super exhausted, and she'd bang the pots and try to wake me up at 6:00 and being like, "Get your life together. You need to go and find a secretarial job. There's temp agencies out there." And I would say, Mom, this is very, very important. Please let me sleep until at least 11:00 AM. I cannot do this. So my health really suffered. I gained 50 pounds being in that situation. But I really wanted, I poured my heart out to get that Perez [PAMM –FB] show to happen well, to be present for Maria Elena. But after that show came up, my whole health just finally was like, oh girl, you can't handle anymore. And it was that thing of, you can't really face many generations of trauma and think you can fix it in a matter of months. You can't suddenly communicate where there hasn't been any model for communication within a family bond. And now she'll just, my mom will come to me and be like, "Oh, that was foolish. I am sorry. I didn't understand." But my goodness, the faith that you're taking risks with full awareness, for them to trust that the model that you're following, even if it looks precarious, that you have some idea of what you want to do just seemed unimaginable.

But I always think of her as a young child trying to go in and find a living for her family and what bravery that must've taken. And sometimes try to remind her, "Hey, some of these things might not be comfortable for all of us, but I am taking all of us into account. I want us all to thrive." And I always try to take my sisters to every country I go, and they're kicking and screaming and, “Oh, what is this?” Because, of course, we would travel, and it wouldn't necessarily be the most luxurious. We wouldn't have the nicest hotel or the nicest flight, but I'd be like, Look at this. Look at this museum. Look at that. And I would always try to be like, We don't know when we would be back in this country, so let's do everything.

[01:52:11]

And the pace in Miami is a lot slower. It's a lot more in touch with your senses and comfortable. And being in New York, I just got really comfortable with being uncomfortable. I was like, interminable subway rides squished against a lot of people, going from a dry environment to wet environment, having your foot sink three feet down because what you thought was concrete, it was actually molten ice. All that became just a thing you slogged through to get to the reward. And so that level of [environmental –FB] adaptability, they hadn't had to go through that in Miami.

I'm just now learning to arrange trips that are going to be a little gentler to them. But it's because I can now afford to do that. I can be like, Listen, this is at your pace. How do we arrange things that you can actually navigate these different spaces in ways that are going to feel generous and make you feel nice and welcomed in these different countries? I can do that now. But all I could give them then was the experience. And they would be like, "What is this? No!" And it's funny, my little sister now is like, "I can't believe I was bitching in Paris. What was I thinking about? That was so great." But she was not having it.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And these were all trips that were around work that you were—

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —a lot of times were work. I remember there was one trip where—I never would take vacations, but after the Perez Museum, I was trying to have a year of just recovering my health. I came back to New York. It was really brutal too, in the sense that the art world is also extremely hierarchical and regional. So when I had my studio in Miami I was making all this work that people wanted, but museum boards would be like, "Hey, we want to visit your studio," assuming I was in New York. And when I would tell them I'm in Miami, they're like, "We'll wait until you're in New York."

There was even a really crass article in the New York Times at the time when Chris Lou was curating the Whitney Biennial, and the headline was, "Miami: it's not us, it's you." [Whitney Biennial to Miami Artists: It's Not Us, It's You. –FB]. And blaming Miami artists for not creating work up to par. That's the kind of, if not recidivist, provincial thinking that makes New York lose out on a lot of talent [and also a lot of regional talent –FB]. A lot of talent then flees to New York to try to be part of it. That's why I've been in this brutal city for so long. But essentially, yeah, I would not have any vacations.

But that year after the Perez, I felt so destroyed. I was trying to really, really regain my health. And that one summer I was like, this summer, it's not my birthday, but I'm going to try to make a time when I will just go to a place I've been wanting to go forever. And so I booked a ticket from my little sister and myself, and we were supposed to go and experience France. She was so pissed. She was like, "I'm not a *prosti,* I'm not a," what is it called? "A companion for hire." I'm like, We're in the city of lights.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Like a escort?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah [laughs].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That's so funny.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah. Or even the 19th century, they would be like the lady's companion. And I'm just like, can we just revel? Can you enjoy the macaroons?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Like a chaperone?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: A chaperone. She's like—but yeah, it's just funny how just a certain level of not knowing the language and not knowing how to navigate can bring a certain level of discomfort where you can't even appreciate how magical the thing can be. I'm now doing the practice of inoculation. I'll give them short little bits, try to make them comfortable. I remember even, so another really important show was, and this was actually influenced by the Perez Museum show, Diana Nawi was one of the jurors for the Future Generation Prize in Ukraine, and I was one of the finalists. I got to go and travel there to the Pinchuk exhibition, and then the second half of it was having work in Venice as part of the *vernissage.*

[01:57:06]

It was my first time in Venice. I'm representing DR in this global competition. I want to have my mom and sisters there. So, I took a big chunk of what I had earned from the Perez work, and I had my mom and little sister—I booked them the most luxurious hotel I could think of.

They had a water taxi pick them up from the airport. They were so uncomfortable. They had the most bespoke breakfast thing they could have, and they were like, " *Hija*, what's wrong with you?" So, I thought *¡No, qué va!* Too good and too bad. I had to find something in the middle.

My mom actually bust out crying. Saying, "My daughter doesn't know how to save her money."[Laughs] I'm like, Woman, can you just enjoy this luxurious thing? The most beautiful hotel with this—I was staying with all the finalists. We were in Lido, in this island off to the side, to be installing, so we'd be commuting. But I was like, You're not going to be staying in no cheapy hotel. You're going to do Venice for the first time in the most beautiful way. But learning to calibrate, like navigate what's comfortable, what's guiding them to that. At a certain point, if I can ever afford it I'm going to have her fly business class and have her luxuriate in it. But first I have to inoculate her into the point of feeling like, Of course, I deserve this. Of course, I'm going to be okay with it.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you. I really appreciate the way that you've been able to talk both, about what was happening in your practice and you were having all of these exposure and a solo exhibition, and residencies and prices and all of these things. At the same time, you were also trying to establish these spaces of care with your family and navigating also all of those understandings. And when you were talking about feeling so uncomfortable in a place that's luxurious, or feeling uncomfortable in a place that is not what you're used to, and I think about also all of the elitism and things that are so much also related to class and that kind of discomfort that the art world also brings with it that we don't really talk about enough, I think. At least in my interviews, I do try to tackle that in some ways, but I think we're used to separating our careers. And artists are especially—

FIRELEI BÁEZ: —it's almost taboo to even mention that. I even think of some of the early Rubell interviews about Oscar Murillo and him being open about the labor background of his parents and how the main factory that employed his parents had his same last name, and the Morales [correction: Rubell's –FB] would talk about him almost as a working-class trophy or a trope rather than a human fully developed brilliant artistic expression, et cetera. They'd say, "We can see the fire in his working man's eyes," kind of wording, which now they're very good friends, but it just shows you the kind of flatness of discourse around class and race within Latin America, and its diasporas, even when you're well-meaning, as they were.

So, to go now and to talk at all about having a working-class background in a way that is not about softshoeing your way into someone's understanding of why you're valid within that space, it just is and we are multivalent beings that can navigate many different things. You're either super low or super high, and there's nothing in between. And your goal can only be to get to the super high. You can never revel in the spaces in between. That's something that is still so taboo.

[02:02:06]

I think that's probably one of the main problems about even designating a Latinx space or a Latin identity in diaspora, it's almost like this idea of impurity of being that you somehow are so ambiguously between spaces that it's not even seen as a bonus. You exist in this bridge that can see both wholly in this whole other way. You are this moment of transmutation. And we can change that, but it's going to be that uncomfortable thing of learning to be comfortable with sinking your foot in three feet of molten ice to get to the road afterward.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: So, I know we've been recording for some time. Usually, as we approach the two hours it can get kind of tiring. And I do have a few more questions, but I think those questions, we can even tackle them right now or in our other recording. And so just to kind of close up this oral history space, is there anything else—I know we didn't cover all of it, obviously, but is there anything else that you find important to document in this audio that's going to be archived for the future and for now?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Yeah, I wonder. Some of the *Ciguapa* figures I had started at Skowhegan and developed in Hunter. I remember at one point, Massimiliano Gioni was doing his—it was kind of like a very whimsical fairytale curation of the Venice Biennale and he asked me for a portfolio. And I thought This is wild. Oh my goodness! I didn't have the preparation to send them the right package, or even the wherewithal to photograph my work well. But it's funny because those very same figures are the ones that drew Cecilia [Alemani] when she invited

me over a decade later to be in the Venice Biennale. She was also drawn to the *Ciguapa* figure. It's always interesting how certain work can resonate.

And, to me, that is one of the longest threads in terms of inspiration and identity formation. Those stories I was told as a child, as I was learning to navigate the world, as I was being seen as a young woman far too soon, what empowered me then was strong enough that it resonated with people from completely different geographies. And that was always so rewarding and encouraging to know that those psychic tools developed by our ancestors speak fluidly to the present, and hopefully to the future. Yeah, it's always like a connected link. Every exhibition I could say, This person saw this here, and then it led to this and this. There's always a long chain. The Berlin Biennale invited me because they saw the Pinchuk Generation Prize, and then Cecilia invited me to do The High Line because she saw the Berlin Biennale artwork. And then, yeah, it's always sequential. So always being present and ready for whatever comes.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And then just, finally, I wanted to ask a little bit more about the future, I guess. I look at these recordings as a shorter recording that perhaps can complement or be looked back in the future when people record when you're, maybe, in your sixties or when you're older. Is there anything that comes up for you when you think about the future? Is there any imagination around how you think your career or your personal life will be in 20 or 30 years from now?

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Oh my goodness. It's funny because my first instinct was to think of, where are we going as humans. I was rewatching the movie Stalker yesterday and at one point, and this movie is what, decades and decades ago before we had iPhones, before we had cell phones to begin with, and they're talking about how all these technological developments are essentially just walking sticks. They're the things that are in hopes of making us walk better, but they're essentially atrophying some of our gifts, our natural talents. So I would hope that when I'm in the future, I can be fully centered in my body and present and able to share that and model that for younger generations and provide that space for them to think of these tools as extensions, but not crutches. And to always be able to come back into their bodies instead of escaping from them.

[02:08:06]

A lot of my upbringing was about negating what I was feeling and what I was at the moment, just to bear through and get through it. And those were helpful. They helped us survive. But they are tools that have limits to their range and don't let you thrive in other spaces. So being able to have that full range, have resilience, have that grit, but also be able to know to rest and revel and rejoice. I hope to be in that. I hope to be connected to the fountain of creativity, to keep making, to find moments of rest, to rejoice, to make as much out of joy as out of grief, to know that I am connected to the world, that I can help the world connect even more.

I'm always doing titles like, *To See Beyond* or *To Breathe Fully*, to have all these things that are beyond human senses or to try to somehow go outside of human limitations. But part of knowing how to do that is to actually learn, what are your senses, what are those limits to fully center the body, fully welcome the pain and the joy and all the creaky ship of it, and then equip it for something more. So yeah, I hope to be—I always heard this quote of artists like Picasso mixing up their whiskey and their turpentine, being so caught up in the work that they didn't know what cup was what—and although I don't want to mix up the spirits, I do want to be so caught up in my work that I'm just in it all the way till I'm 99.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you, Firelei.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Thank you.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I'm going to stop the recording now, but you can stay on.

FIRELEI BÁEZ: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]