

**Caged Birds: *Discourse vs. Defeatism as Different Hues of Art
and Artists Move Uptown.***
**A Reflection Accompanying José Carlos Casado's Public Sculpture,
*I Don't Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Ah Me...***
By Mandy Harris Williams



It's an unseasonably stormy week in the beginning of November, the first time I see José Carlos Casado's newly installed public sculpture, *I Don't Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Ah Me...* I've erected my umbrella halfway through the walk from my adolescent homestead to where I'll meet the artist in Marcus Garvey Park. At this point in the journey, 5th Avenue turns into Mount Morris Park West, the street I moved to when I was 12, and one of the city's primary thoroughfares (125th Street connects the Triborough Bridge to the Hudson River) quiets to one lane of traffic and a thankfully underpopulated, 2 by 4 block, verdant, city park -- comprised of lush overprotected fields and a civic compound: which includes an amphitheater, one of the city's oldest fire towers, and a public swimming pool which is said to be one of the cleanest in Manhattan. For all of its civic and historical import, the park remains a hidden sort of treasure, cresting in attendance for its popular summertime music festivals (which date back to 1969's Harlem Cultural Festival, or "Black Woodstock"), and waning on days like this -- wetter, cooler.

Earlier in 2018, the park became home to a series of Maren Hassinger's *Monuments*, a network of 8 brown branch sculptures. I pass a few of them on my walk to the northeast quadrant of the park, towards the "Drummer's Circle" section, which is nestled into the ancient rock formation, Mount Morris, at the center of the park. Casado's new sculpture is erected in this semi-protected cove. It sits on top of a green base, used for a previous artwork - massive, tall enough to stack at least two men high and several men wide. I imagine you could put maybe 12 people in this cage.

Browned leaves fall neatly on top and inside of the cage that encloses the aluminium structures -- at first they look like partly deflated helium balloons, with their bright, celebratory colored pinks and fuschias. I know, however, that they are not balloons, nor birthday announcements. Rather, Casado has rendered in 3D this colorful pattern from close up photos of human skin. It's a neat feature of the work -- the layering of organic and metallic material, a convergence of the living and the longstanding. It's one of the elements of the piece that I like best, maybe not so much the effect, but the knowing. Then again, I am not a traditional art critic, so much as a critic of art. I observe how it is made, who has made it, how it gets where it's going, and the values, theoretical and monetary, of each of these steps.

Today, especially, though, there is something unharmonious about the piece in its new home. While every other artwork in the park takes on the tones of the park itself -- brown branches in Hassinger's work, and another work, a rubber tire black bust entitled, *Peaceful Perch*, by Kim Dacres, which sits atop a mount by Daniel A. Matthews, at the southern mouth of the park where 5th Avenue reclaims its name. *I Don't Know Why*, strikes discord with its brightness -- and perhaps, it's not accidental. Perhaps the piece, the artist, the title, and the conversation around the work are all bound in this awareness, in this admission: certainly, making an effort to respect space and demonstrate love, but seemingly out of place, though unashamed, and looking for the human textures herein.

One of those human textures is the vulnerability of otherness. Perhaps it's not the sort I've understood growing up in this particular neighborhood. José Carlos and I can both remember being scared to walk home from school, for different reasons. I shuttered each time I emerged from the 125th Street subway station into sexualizing catcalls; José Carlos remembers being beaten and robbed several times as a kid, facing homophobic discrimination throughout his life -- although thousands of miles away, in the south of Spain. It's this engagement that is at the center of the piece. *I Don't Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Ah Me...* admits a lack of total understanding but offers some. It seeks to offer tribute to Harlem's caged birds, and explore the similarities, differences and particularities between the artist and his new community. "One of the sad things I believe is happening in the art world," Casado notes, "is that if you are a woman, you better do feminist work to be considered. Same if you are gay, black, an immigrant or whatever. We humans are complex creatures! I can identify with the struggles of women, or blacks, or any other minorities. I must!"

I suppose this is where I come in: to collaborate, not so much on a product, as an understanding. I've been invited by José Carlos to figure out how I feel, and given a collaborator's fee, and been permitted to renegotiate when I've realized I asked for too little, and so personally, this art meets me at the place where I'd like all work by non-black artists, in black spaces to meet me: real discourse, real sustenance. And I hope it continues to do so for the community beyond me. On our first phone call, José Carlos listens patiently while I wax big budget about programming that might feature the black women to whom the sculpture pays tribute. Later, I learned that Casado has also hired folks from the neighborhood to help with the installation, including local strongman, trainer Jamel Ali, who trains clients in the playground-cum-fitness area at the southeast quadrant of the park. How do our stories, different in ways, similar in ways, bring this sculpture's mission to fruition?

José Carlos comes to life just minutes before the sculpture itself. As I approach him, the rain lets up a bit. I put my umbrella down and give him dos besitos, a friendly greeting from his home country. I'm happy to finally meet my collaborator, albeit pressed to witness the work, and get to a drier location before the next bout of rain. He's already pulled up the augmented reality portion of the sculpture on his iPhone. When I hold the phone up to the piece, the sculpture is joined by several other cages. These are brown metallic tone, a curious juxtaposition to the central purple piece. But it's not just structures that the AR provides. It's a *mise en scene* -- a spooky one. These new cages are bird cages for giants. And inside each one, there's a bird's perch, empty, eerily creaking as though one has just flown the coop. It suggests a presence, no longer here -- an intentional organic absence.

This absence may represent Maya Angelou, the deceased but well remembered Poet Laureate who spent moments in late life on Mount Morris Park West, whose autobiography was an inspiration for Casado's piece. The book follows Angelou's childhood through young adulthood, as she learns about racism, struggles with her own internalization thereof, navigates complicated familiar relationships, and heals from the experience and consequence of sexual assault. It's a bleak account that reminded José Carlos of the seeming hopelessness of today's social and political climates.

But there is hope. AR offers another possibility -- perhaps technology always will offer us something more hopeful, a network connection or portal that would remain otherwise unseen. In the additional cages that fence in viewers when activating this element of the installation, participants can walk into and out of cages. Here the doors swing open, presenting an alternative. Perhaps there are cages we can't see, and other people in cages we can't imagine, and don't easily see. Maybe we can join one another in those cages, guide one another out of them, test their boundaries and limits, and dismantle them once and for all.

As we begin to walk away from the sculpture, to a nearby coffee shop, I tell José Carlos about the cages I've witnessed affecting this particular community. I can't stop thinking about the absence, and about how many men can fit in those cages. "I see a lot of the girls I grew up with still here. Girls I was on the step team with, who are all about my age," I start. "But I don't see a lot of the boys..." The absence, the cages, remind me of them -- babyfaced, cute boys with big bodies and slow strides, who always said "hi" when they passed my family on our stoop.

We walk to a nearby new coffee shop. I tell him about the raids that occurred at the building at the end of my block, watching teenage boys get handcuffed, the constant police presence that lasted for months, and ended only once the demographics of Mount Morris Park West had fully warped for my age cohort and the one just above mine. I remembered having heard stories about who's dad was a gangster, who had bodies and enemies and affiliations. I remembered the sound of the dog fights that echoed from the amphitheater late at night, and an occasional gunshot, or instance of gang graffiti. I remember ignoring certain people all the time, and being pranked in a pretty scary way on my way home from school one time. But more than crime itself, I remember the spectre of crime, which is to say, that as a young woman growing up on Mount Morris Park West, it never truly affected my day to day life. These are absences that I'm reminded of.

More immediately proximate to the sculpture, there is of course, the absence of the Drummers. I hated the Drummers' Circle. At ages 12 through 18, I had no interest in any tradition that loudly awoke me at 9 a.m. on nearly every weekend morning. I eventually adapted, as we do with things that we don't feel entitled to change, and must survive. But my entitlement, and that of the lionshare of my neighbors, paled in comparison to that of the residents of the 2002 Fifth Avenue building. Built in 2006, the residents of this building represented a large influx of the new, white Harlem. One resident from the building wrote, "why don't we just get nooses for everyone of those lowlifes and hang them from a tree? They're used to that kind of treatment anyway!" By this time, I had left Mount Morris Park for college. Although it no longer had anything to do with my personal convenience, I was enraged by the notion that someone could move into a heavily ethnicized, deeply historical and cultural section of the city and then take umbrage with how that culture is performed. The letter went on to state, "I hope you all agree that the best thing that has happened to Harlem is gentrification. Let's get rid of these 'people' and improve the neighborhood once and for all." Here again was the spectre of crime.

On this rainy day with José Carlos, I'm feeling vaguely threatened by the idea of this place again. Back in LA, where I've lived for 8 years, I'll move out of my Echo Park apartment, with slim to no chance of being able to afford something in the area. There, I've played a different role in the gentrification ecology. There is, of course, no option of moving home, that old comfort that soothes so many American 30-somethings facing an economy that does not aptly provide for their ability to afford city living: Harlem is too expensive. I cannot afford to come home, and therefore, home, both realistically, and spiritually, dissolves -- an existential violence that seems only natural given the neighborhood's growing threat.

But today, I think we have made gentle inroads to a more productive community change, a genuine collaboration. Discussions are better than nooses. Where demographic and cultural change in

historic communities is often positioned in extremes, a necessary cleanse or an inevitable evil, there are ways that communities might diversify for the more artful or discursive. Collaboration is far less violent than raids, or threats of removal, whether for traditions or people themselves. Perhaps if more sympathy and earnest curiosity were employed as people moved to different parts of the city, gentrification would slow naturally. Casado's admission: I realize I'm a bit out of place here, what can I do to express my sympathy for your hardships, how can I utilize my resources to create a more understanding, is different than a colonization: let's get rid of those people, and make this place better. The artist hopes to use this model for art as a discursive platform in his next public installation opening in 2019 in Rufus King Park, Jamaica, Queens, called *COMMUNITY: you never really know your own language until you learn another*, will once again investigate the literal and figurative of human textures: gentrification, shared space, and local voice.

This new format for interaction, art as host to dialogue rather than an end of itself recalls an Angelou line José Carlos is especially fond of: "In order to avoid this bitter end, we would all have to be born again, and born with the knowledge of alternatives." In order to avoid the drastic ends that have been proposed -- stagnation or elimination -- here we have created an alternative. Maybe we are destined to see a new Harlem, this may be natural if not outright positive but Casado proposes an alternative methodology: opened cages, closely held community, discourse, and brightness.

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The Public Art Initiative is an ongoing program developed by Marcus Garvey Park Alliance President, Connie Lee in 2016 that creates opportunities for artists who live and work uptown to produce and install art in public parks and open spaces in Northern Manhattan.

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