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## The Art and Activism of the Young Lords

Three New York City venues look back at the Puerto Rican nationalist group

By Mark Armao



(slideshow – 1 of 7) Three New York City venues are looking back at the Puerto Rican nationalist group the Young Lords in the exhibition '¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York.' Máximo R. Colón's 'Untitled,' seen here, is on view at the Bronx Museum. *Máximo R. Colón*

When garbage started piling up on East Harlem sidewalks in the late 1960s because of irregular trash collection, a group of young activists decided to intervene. They dragged the discarded mattresses, old refrigerators and abandoned cars into the street, blocking traffic in a dramatic protest. They then set the garbage aflame.

The protesters were members of the Young Lords, Puerto Rican nationalists who would go on to become one of the most radical civil-rights activist groups in New York City. Controversial in their heyday, they are now the subject of a new, multi-venue exhibition.

Like their better-known collaborators, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords—whose New York chapter was founded in 1969—aimed to combat social oppression in their community through highly organized protests that sometimes involved run-ins with the law.



The Young Lords Party newspaper, *Palante*, on view at El Museo del Barrio. PHOTO: EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO, NY

The exhibition, titled “¡Presente! The Young Lords in New York,” documents those efforts with photographs, publications, films and artwork that came out of the movement. The Bronx Museum of the Arts, El Museo del Barrio and the Loisaida Center will each focus on different aspects of the Lords’ history, which began as a struggle for Puerto Rican independence and racial equality, before evolving into a much larger fight.

“The civil-rights movement is imagined in black and white,” said Johanna Fernández, co-curator of the Bronx Museum’s exhibition. “But the movement in itself was diverse, and it was concerned with problems of social and economic

import” in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, such as unemployment and poor health care. Their work testing East Harlem children for lead poisoning—and trumpeting the dire results at news conferences—helped lead to city legislation on the issue.

The intersection of activism and art is a major theme of “¡Presente!” The Bronx Museum’s portion of the exhibition, which runs until Oct. 15, features an artistic re-creation of the Young Lords’ headquarters, complete with their distinctive posters and a ’70s-era radio that plays interviews with its members.

It also includes around 30 pages from group’s bilingual newspaper, *Palante*, many emblazoned with vibrant artwork by artists associated with the Young Lords. Several in the group were themselves artists and writers, said co-curator Yasmin Ramírez. Founding New York member Juan Gonzáles, for one, has written several books, and the original party chairman, Felipe Luciano, is a published poet.



Hiram Maristany's 'David with Palante,' V. 2, N. 4, at El Museo del Barrio. PHOTO: HIRAM MARISTANY

Prints and paintings from the era are interspersed with newer pieces, such as a reimagined Young Lords poster by contemporary street artist and activist Shepard Fairey.

The walls of the main gallery are lined with photographs depicting the organization during fiery demonstrations in the Bronx.

In 1970, Denise Oliver-Velez became the first woman elected to the party's central committee. (Gender equality was a big issue.) She was among the Young Lords who barricaded themselves inside Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx to protest the facility's unsafe conditions—an event portrayed in the exhibition with both photographs and film footage.

“It was one of the most disgusting things I’ve ever seen,” said Ms. Oliver-Velez, who is an adjunct professor of women’s studies and anthropology at the State University of New York at New Paltz. “Rats used to run across the operating table...and there would be cockroaches in the medicine cups.”

After the takeover, the building was torn down and a new hospital erected in its place.

Founded around the same time as the Young Lords organization, El Museo del Barrio was instituted to promote Latino art and culture—topics largely ignored by museums at the time, said curator Rocío Aranda-Alvarado.

El Museo’s piece of the exhibition, running from July 22 to Oct. 17, will focus on the Lords’ East Harlem activity, featuring many images captured by the group’s in-house photographer, Hiram Maristany. Among the subjects: the group’s takeover of the First Spanish United Methodist Church as well as their free-breakfast program for children.



Shepard Fairey's 'Visual Disobedience,' on view at the Bronx Museum. PHOTO: SHEPARD FAIREY/OBEY GIANT ART

Paintings and political prints created by prominent Young Lords artists will also be on display in the Harlem museum, including a colorful silk-screen print by Antonio Martorell protesting the U.S. Navy's occupation of an island off Puerto Rico and an expressionist painting of a skull-headed Uncle Sam by Carlos Osorio called “Símbolos Que Nos Joden” (“Symbols That Enslave Us”).

Several contemporary works were commissioned specifically for the exhibition. Miguel Luciano fashioned a piece consisting of four fuchsia-colored AK-47s, recurrent

symbols in Young Lords iconography.

A third exhibition, opening July 30 at Latino social-service and cultural center Loisaida Inc., will focus on the Lords’ presence in the Lower East Side. Documents include audio recordings and found footage of party members reciting poetry and speaking about their cause.

The show will also feature unpublished photos by Mr. Maristany, and posters by graphic artist and poet Sandra María Esteves. It will examine the efforts of the Young Lords Gay and Lesbian Caucus, as well as the organization's influence on the neighborhood's burgeoning Latin-jazz scene, said Wilson Valentín-Escobar, who is co-organizing the exhibit with Libertad Guerra.

“The Young Lords redefined the mainstream stereotypes of Puerto Ricans [as being] prone to violence, drug addiction and welfare dependence,” Ms. Fernández said. “They challenged that perception through their eloquent, strategic and smart activism.”

### SLIDESHOW IMAGES



(2 of 7) The Young Lords were Puerto Rican nationalists who would go on to become one of the most radical civil-rights activist groups in New York City. Shepard Fairey's 'Visual Disobedience' is on view at the Bronx Museum.  
*Shepard Fairey/OBEY Giant Art*





(3 of 7) The Lords' history began as a struggle for Puerto Rican independence and racial equality. Hiram Maristany's 'David with Palante, V. 2, N. 4,' is on view at El Museo del Barrio. El Museo's piece of the multi-venue exhibition, running from July 22 to Oct. 17, will focus on the Lords' East Harlem activity. *Hiram Maristany*



(4 of 7) The Young Lords—whose New York chapter was founded in 1969—aimed to combat social oppression in their community through highly organized protests that sometimes involved run-ins with the law. Máximo R. Colón's 'Borinquen Plaza' from 1971 shows a commemorative march for the anniversary of the 1937 Ponce massacre. The initially peaceful march ended with violence. *Máximo R. Colón*



(5 of 7) The Young Lords Party newspaper, Palante, on view at El Museo del Barrio. *El Museo del Barrio, NY*



(6 of 7) A detail of Miguel Luciano's 'Health, Food, Housing, Education,' on view at El Museo del Barrio. *Miguel Luciano*



**(7 of 7)** Maximo Colon's 'Partido Young Lords,' a gelatin silver print included in the El Museo del Barrio exhibit.  
*Photo: Máximo R. Colón*