

# Layered Time: Allison Maria Rodriguez

(The 3<sup>rd</sup> of 4 thematically connected solo exhibitions)

**Exhibition Dates: June 28<sup>th</sup> to August 6<sup>th</sup> 2021**  
**Spoke Gallery- Medicine Wheel Productions**

*Layered Time* is a series of four solo exhibitions connected thematically by how each artist incorporates facets of time into their work. *Layered Time: Allison Maria Rodriguez-Once in a Lifetime* is the third solo exhibition in this series. *Layered Time* was originally conceived as a group show that was reformatted to be four solo shows for Spoke Gallery's new space. The three additional artists who were or will be featured in 2021 with solo exhibitions are: David Lloyd Brown, Naoe Suzuki, and Shea Justice.

"Allison Maria Rodriguez is a first-generation Cuban-American interdisciplinary artist working predominantly in video installation and new media. She creates immersive experiential spaces that challenge conventional ways of knowing and understanding the world. Through video, performance, digital animation, photography, drawing, collage and installation, Rodriguez merges and blends mediums to create new pictorial spaces for aesthetic, emotional, and conceptual exploration. She uses art to communicate beyond language – to open up a space of possibility for the viewer to encounter alternative ways of connecting to the emotional realities of others."<sup>(1)</sup>

For her *Layered Time* solo show at Spoke Gallery, Rodriguez is debuting a powerful new multi-channel video installation entitled, *Once in a Lifetime*. This installation, like all of her works, "focuses extensively on climate change, species extinction and the interconnectivity of existence."<sup>(1)</sup> This new silent multi-channel video installation has four large scale monitors of a similar size and she has also painted the gallery wall a specific shade of gray for this new piece.

The genesis of this work and the video footage for it, comes directly from Rodriguez volunteering in Costa Rica in 2019 with the nonprofit organization Earth Watch. Rodriguez has been involved with Earth Watch since 2017 via residencies and volunteering. In Costa Rica, she helped support researchers working to ensure the survival of leather back sea turtles and their hatchlings. "Many of the remaining Pacific leatherbacks nest in the sands of Playa Grande, Playa Ventanas, and Playa Langosta on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica."<sup>(2)</sup> She, along with the researchers and other volunteers, monitored and at times moved the eggs of the sea turtles to safety. She also monitored the hatchlings making their perilous trek to the ocean.

Although she brought some of her portable video equipment with her for this 2019 trip, she did not go to Costa Rica with the intention to create new work. However, during Rodriguez's time volunteering, a juvenile blue whale became stranded and died on Costa Rica's Playa Cabuyal beach. The whale was dead by the time Rodriguez went to view it with the researchers she was volunteering with. This experience impacted Rodriguez profoundly and like many artists, she has used her artform as a way to process and to share this impactful experience. The blue whale, like leather back sea turtles and the majority of sea turtles, is an endangered species. This species of whale, also like many species of whales, is endangered as a direct result of mankind's hunting them into near extinction. It should be pointed out that the gray Rodriguez chose to paint the gallery wall is called anchor gray. This paint choice references and underscores mankind's direct role in endangering blue whales and the ocean's ecosystems.

The circle of life and its fragility are front and center in Rodriguez's new work. This video installation "centers around the physical body of a stranded juvenile blue whale" and juxtaposes imagery of hatching sea turtles "struggling to reach the water with the whale who also needed water to survive." Three of the monitors are dedicated the blue whale footage the artist took, while the fourth monitor is devoted to her footage of sea turtle hatchlings. This work, according to Rodriguez is "both a memorial to and a witnessing of this particular whale, as well as a summoning within the viewer of a sense of

the presence of interconnection..... Multiple biologists stated that to see a blue whale this close is a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity. The title of this project comes from the tension I experience in this phrase." <sup>(3)</sup>

Unlike many of her past video installations, the majority of the moving images in this installation have fewer visual layers and less pops of bright vibrant colors. Three of the four videos that comprise this new installation are somber in tone and color. The dominant color pallet Rodriguez chose for these three videos that depict the whale are shades of gray and black. For the two videos that show two different views of the whale's body on the beach, Rodriguez has made the footage of the whale and all on the beach black and gray in tone. However, she has kept and has heighten the blue sky in both of these two works. This gives the footage a surreal feeling.

The third monitor of this "trptych" is centered between the other two monitors. The video imagery is a close-up the whale's eye. This footage almost fills the entire frame of the video and it takes a moment for one to grasp what they are viewing. Rodriguez has not changed or colored this imagery for this moving image. The only hint of color, other than the gray and black tones of the beach sand and the whale's skin and eye, is the red blood of the whale that is at the bottom of the left hand part of the screen/image. The blood is a stark reminder to the viewer of what they are "witnessing".

The imagery of the turtle hatchlings is not somber monochromatic in color like the footage of the whale. Instead, Rodriguez has made this imagery in heighten shades of blue, light tan, and white. This choice blurs the distinction of the sea and the sky. It seems as if she is showing the two fates of those hatchlings: Those that made it to the ocean and those who didn't. One wonders if those hatchlings who didn't make it, if they are swimming in the sky towards a sort of afterlife. Rodriguez has also abstracted these images and has also made the hatchlings seem as if they are animations. This makes this imagery surreal, but in a different way from the whale footage.

The three monitors that show the footage of the whale are all securely fastened onto the gray wall on the horizon line (or horizontally as one would watch a tv screen). A horizon in an art work often signifies or symbolizes the future. Rodriguez's horizon line placement serves almost as a harbinger or warning of future beaching and deaths of whales unless more is done by humans to save them from extinction. The monitor showing the turtle hatchlings imagery is installed vertically and is leaning against the gallery wall. It is placed just underneath the monitor that shows the footage of whale's eye. The fragility of the turtle hatchlings is further conveyed by the seemingly precariousness of the unsecured leaning monitor. All of the artist's visual choices of how the four monitors are installed underscore the gravity and interconnectedness of what the viewer is watching.

Like in her past works, there are references to the artist and her family in this new work. The two videos that depict the body of the whale on the beach feature a white picture frame that is taken from one of Rodriguez's old family photos. This choice connects the *Once in a Lifetime* installation to her and her family. These frames also reference the feeling of nostalgia contained in this new installation. The use of the picture frames connects her, her family, and all of us to our roles in climate change and in species extinctions. She shares, "As a whole the piece bears witness to the fragility of existence as well as the connection between the viewer, the whale, and the struggle of these tiny hatchlings." <sup>(3)</sup>

Allison Maria Rodriguez's work and artistic practice has much in common with work and practice of the Naoe Suzuki (Suzuki had the second solo exhibition of the *Layered Time* solo series). Like Suzuki's artistic practice, Allison Maria Rodriguez's practice is rooted in her concern for our planet. Suzuki's *Extinction Studies* highlights the past history of the original wildlife and ecosystem of the Adirondack region. Most of these animals named in Suzuki's map drawings are no longer present or are present in much smaller numbers. Suzuki's choice of materials and process (paper, drawing, ink) and her use of historical maps as source material helps to underscore the layered timeframe and also how long humans have been destroying ecosystems.

Rodriguez's new work also highlights wildlife and ecosystems from a specific place. However, she does so in a contemporary or recent timeframe and she is using contemporary time-based technology to create her work. Her new videos are in a sense thousands of layered connected moving images. Her *Once in a Lifetime* is a somber installation that depicts and documents wildlife that we can consciously choose to save *now* by proactively taking steps to do so. Rodriguez's artworks, like Suzuki's, are beautiful and disturbing. Both artists travel to sites and places that are directly related to their socially engaged art practice. Both artists are calling viewers into action to save the planet and the living creates that inhabit it. The question remains: Is there enough of us answering these calls to action to make a difference?

*-Kathleen Bitetti, curator*

For more information about Allison Maria Rodriguez and her art work, see [www.allisonmariarodriguez.com](http://www.allisonmariarodriguez.com)

**More about the artist:** Allison Maria Rodriguez's work has been exhibited internationally, throughout the country and extensively in the New England area, in both traditional and non-traditional art spaces. Her work is also on view in the recently opened exhibition, [A Thread, Extended, at Northeastern University's Gallery 360](#). A 2021 finalist for Mass Cultural Council's prestigious Artist Fellowships, Rodriguez is a 2019 recipient of SPOKE's (then Medicine Wheel's) Activist Artist Award. She is also working alongside fellow Boston artist [Franklin Marval](#) on a SPOKE-led creative placemaking initiative in S. Boston's Old Colony neighborhood. Funded by Beacon Communities and Boston Housing Authority, the project will engage residents and key institutional partners in Old Colony to create art that improves the quality of life in this neighborhood as it undergoes a complex, decade-long redevelopment. The arts will give voice to residents and community partners as they navigate the creation and growth of this neighborhood.

- (1) Quote from Allison Maria Rodriguez's website bio page <https://allisonmariarodriguez.com/bio/>
- (2) Quote from Earth Watch's website for its program for volunteers. <https://earthwatch.org/expeditions/costa-rican-sea-turtles>
- (3) Quote from Allison Maria Rodriguez's artist statement for *Once in a Lifetime*

***MWP/SPOKE receives funding from: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), a federal agency; the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC), a state agency; and from the Boston Cultural Council, a local agency which is funded by the Massachusetts Cultural Council and is administrated by the Boston Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture.***