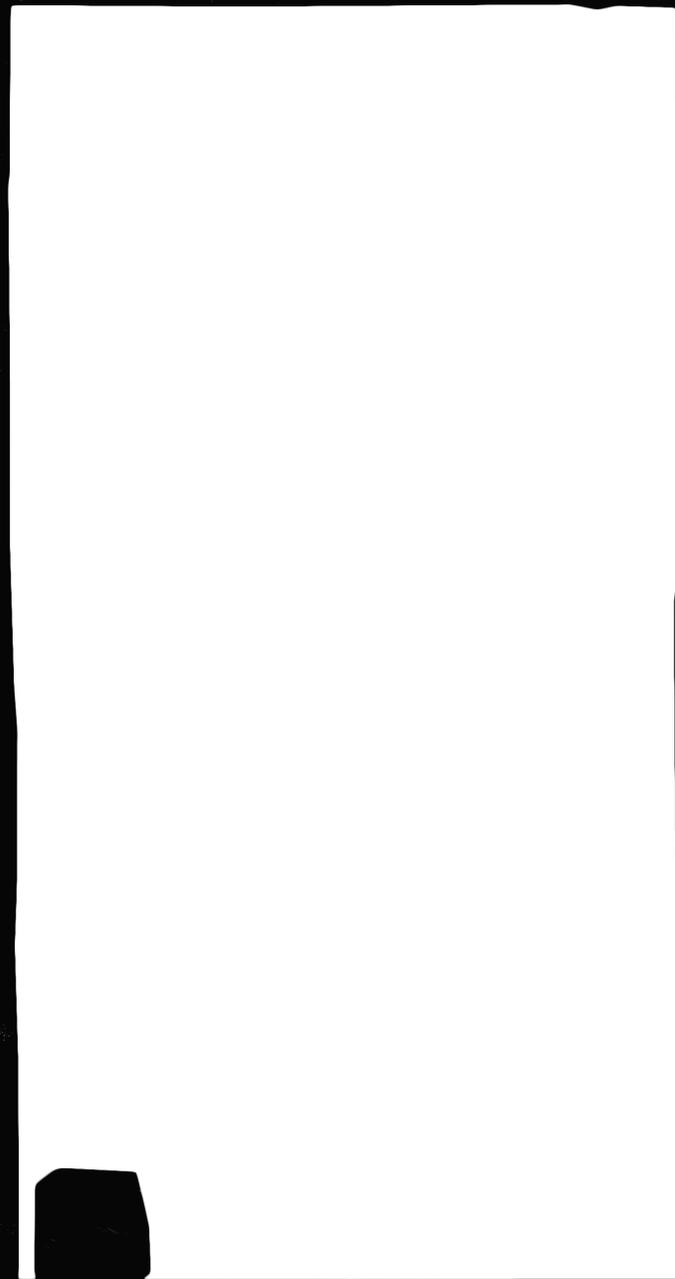


DIDIER WILLIAM  
NESTOR ARMANDO GIL/  
TALLER WORKSHOP  
SWARM.





# CONTENTS

## **1 FOREWORD**

Brooke Davis Anderson

## **3 NOTES TOWARDS THE IMPERATIVE TO SWARM.**

Laurel V. McLaughlin and Mechella Yezernitskaya

## **9 IMAGINARY HOMELANDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIDIER WILLIAM**

Didier William, Laurel V. McLaughlin, Mechella Yezernitskaya

## **21 “THE ONLY PLACE WE’VE EVER BEEN FREE IS ON THE FLORIDA STRAITS”: AN INTERVIEW WITH NESTOR ARMANDO GIL/TALLER WORKSHOP**

Nestor Armando Gil, Clark Addis, Laurel V. McLaughlin, Mechella Yezernitskaya

## **38 EXHIBITION CHECKLIST**



# FOREWORD

Brooke Davis Anderson

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) is proud to organize Philadelphia's debut of *SWARM.*, featuring artists Didier William and Nestor Armando Gil/Taller Workshop. The works of these artists delve deeply into shared and personal aspects of immigrant identity and experience. They celebrate the richness of their heritages from Haiti and Cuba, respectively, while simultaneously challenging colonial histories and contemporary understanding. In many ways, the complexity in their artworks is the true "American story," and we're honored to share it with our PAFA audiences.

This exhibition and publication, featuring notes by the curators and interviews, are indebted to the artists whose intelligence and generosity inspired this collaboration. We are also grateful for Curlee Raven Holton, whose insight brought these artists together at the Experimental Printmaking Institute (EPI) at Lafayette College, Easton, PA, and who continues to be a wonderful friend of PAFA.

We are extremely grateful to the lenders of this exhibition, the Robert and Frances Coulborn Kohler, Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, MO, the Union College Permanent Collection, Schenectady, NY, and private collectors, whose works strengthened the presentation of *SWARM.* Our guest curatorial team, Laurel McLaughlin and Mechella Yezernitskaya, have brought their dedication, creativity, and scholarship to this exhibition and accompanying online publication. This exhibition could not have taken shape without the guidance of our Curator of Contemporary Art, Jodi Throckmorton, and the strategic ingenuity of our Director of Exhibitions, Judith Thomas. Thanks to our conservator, Mary McGinn, who consulted with the artists on the preservation and presentation of the works, and registrar, Jennifer Johns, who tactfully brought these works to PAFA from various parts of the United States. I want

especially to thank our fantastic preparator team, Mark Knobelsdorf and Michael Gibbons, who, along with the artists and their studios, brought this vision to fruition in our galleries. Liz McDermott was integral to the presentation of the works through framing and label making, and Barbara Katus, manager of imaging services, also for her exceptional installation photography in the online publication. And, Director of Education, Monica Zimmerman, and Manager of Public Programs, Abby King, created programs that connected our communities to the art within and beyond our walls. Our partnership with the PAFA school led to collaborations on summer workshops with the artists. Additionally, our marketing team, deftly guided by Malini Doddamani, and our Development team, formerly led by Melissa Kaiser, provided important internal support for this project. I'd like to thank especially this season's interns, Liam Bailey, Tessa Haas, and Abigail Lua, for their valuable contributions to this project.

And finally, generous support for *SWARM.* was provided by Robert and Frances Coulborn Kohler, Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Reginald Browne, Emily and Mike Cavanagh, Suzanne and Norman Cohn, Ruth Fine, John and Susan Horseman, Dr. and Mrs. J. Brien Murphy, and Mr. & Mrs. Hal Sorgenti. Additional support has been made possible by Laura and Richard Vague for contemporary exhibitions and Jonathan L. Cohen for special exhibitions for 2018–2019. Morris Gallery sponsorship for *SWARM.* is supported by Sei and an anonymous donor. We are extremely grateful for this circle of support that made this exhibition possible.

Brooke Davis Anderson  
*Edna S. Tuttleman Director of the Museum  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*



# NOTES TOWARDS THE IMPERATIVE TO SWARM.

Laurel V. McLaughlin and Mechella Yezernitskaya

**A note about notes:** Notes are provisional, cursory, and marginal, aiming to redirect and propose rather than dictate and define. They compose a communicative channel, linking voices across time and space. Notes are open records, or epistles, meant for those who will come after to add to the story. Here, we have numerous types of notes: imperative, curatorial, field, and post, inspired by this collaboration and the pursuit of continual learning. Rather than writing an incomplete history of *SWARM*, in this exhibition, we present these notes as layers of a larger story that extend beyond the content provided here. Instead, we present notes from the field—this iteration of the collaboration of artists Didier William and Nestor Armando Gil/Taller Workshop—intended to reflect upon the exhibition, propose further avenues of inquiry, and embody the communal experience that is *SWARM*.

**An imperative note from the artists:** As Didier William and Nestor Armando Gil/Taller Workshop conceived of the central tenet of the exhibition: *to “swarm” is to teem, converge, to confront en masse—period.*

**A curatorial note:** Taking this urgent concept as a point of departure, we sought to exhibit *SWARM*.’s many layers in this artistic collaboration. The imperative beckons viewers, through the punctuation of a period, to physically and intellectually “swarm” historical and contemporary manifestations of colonialism in order to disarm systems of political, economic, and cultural control.

This imperative takes various forms throughout the exhibition—questioning, challenging, reexamining, and transforming—in “swarming” configurations, such as revolution, identity, spirituality, process, and affect. In turn, these create rippling effects of empathy and connection, forging kinships across diasporas, or the dispersal of peoples from their homelands. Both artists’ practices are inflected by the personal and mythical histories of their Haitian and Cuban heritages, as well as the diasporic communities they call home in the United States. While William and Gil/Taller Workshop engage with their heritages and histories, they also offer viewers opportunities to contemplate personal and collective facets of diasporic identity.

Presented across the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts’ Historic Landmark Building, *SWARM*.’s challenge reaches beyond the ideological and seeps into the foundations of the first American art institution, the historic city of Philadelphia, and the experience of being a citizen of the United States. In this accompanying publication, we sat down with both artists in their studios at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Lafayette College, Easton, PA for discussions about their histories and heritages of immigration, experiences of life in diaspora, and the afterlife of colonialism in contemporary life. These conversations activated their multivalent collaboration and we are honored to feature their voices together for the first time in this publication.

In many ways, our conversations with Didier and Nestor directed and inspired the curatorial structure in *SWARM*. Each section of the exhibition applies their imperative, “to swarm,” to an aspect of their diasporic experiences. The repetition of this imperative throughout the exhibition creates pointed opportunities for viewers to reflect upon and respond to oppressive histories, syncretic faith traditions, heterogeneous artistic processes, hybrid identities, and emotional experiences. Our “notes from the field,” which are drawn from our conversations with the artists as well as our research, further illuminate these layers of “swarms.” By referencing “the field,” we do not call upon the rigid and often exclusionary art historical canon, but instead ascribe to the ideological and lived facets of diasporic experience. Through these five applications of “swarm,” viewers encounter possible layers of the imperative’s urgent call. In collaboration with the artists, we chose the manifestations that united Nestor and Didier’s experiences.

#### **Note from the field #1: *SWARM*. Revolutions**

The complicated revolutionary struggles against colonial and dictatorial rule in Haiti and Cuba informs much of William and Gil/Taller Workshop’s work. The Haitian and Cuban revolutions were ongoing uprisings in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries that spurred collective action on the part of the people against autocratic systems and regimes.

The Haitian Revolution was a series of conflicts that took place from 1791 to 1804. In 1802, racial and socio-economic stratifications in society between enslaved people, *affranchise* (or mixed-race Haitians), and white slave owners contributed to a revolt led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758–1806) and Henry Christophe (1767–1820) in 1802 against the French forces of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821). The revolt is known in modern history as the only successful slave revolt resulting in an independent black Haitian nation. More than a century later, in July of 1953, the Cuban Revolution was led by the rebel Fidel Castro (1926–2016) against the military dictator Fulgencio Batista (1901–1973). Known as the “Triumphant Revolution,” the event radically altered the country’s domestic and foreign relations, as the only communist country in the Western Hemisphere. While the revolution introduced progressive social reforms, its nationalist policies proved challenging for surrounding democratic nations.



**Plate 1**  
***Godforsaken Asylum/Azil Politik*, 2017**  
Didier William (b. 1983)  
Ink and wood carving on panel  
26 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

Both William and Gil/Taller Workshop stage their works against the backdrop of these revolutionary histories by “swarming,” or reexamining, their agency in the contemporary moment. Both of these revolutions led to widespread social, political, economic, and ideological shifts in Haiti, Cuba, and their diasporas.

**Note from the field #2: SWARM. Spirituality**

Interwoven within the historical, social, and political contexts, are powerful Haitian and Cuban spiritual traditions. These are inflected with a wide range of influences including Christian practices during colonial rule, African religions brought to the Caribbean through the slave trade, and pre-Columbian rituals. William and Gil/Taller Workshop both incorporate aspects of Vodou, Santería, and Catholicism into their art as a “swarm,” or challenge, to the imposition of religion through colonization.

Vodou is a creolized religion influenced by the Dahomean, Kongo, and Yoruba peoples of Africa. Worshippers of Vodou believe in spirits, or *lwa*, who govern the world. The aim of Vodou practice is to *sevi lwa*, or “serve the spirits,” in order to gain protection, favor, and health. Santería, or the “Way of the Saints,” is also a religion of African descent, emerging from a mixture of Yoruba traditions and those of the pre-Columbian indigenous peoples. Worshippers of Santería honor the *orishas*, saint-like figures that guide followers through times of hardship and offer wisdom and protection. Due to the outlawing of local religions under colonial rule in both Haiti and Cuba, syncretism, or the merging of religious practices, often took place within and alongside Christianity. The incorporation of original faith traditions such as Vodou and Santería in the works of William and Gil/Taller Workshop are thus homages to spiritual conceptions of home and belonging.

**Note from the field #3: SWARM. Identity**

Immigrant identity and heritage unites both William and Gil/Taller Workshop’s artistic practices in diaspora. While identity is generally known as “the fact of being who or what a person is,” William and Gil/Taller Workshop “swarm,” or question, can we ever be sure? Are we ever exactly



**Plate 2**  
***Boca (Your Memories Are My Myths) (detail of performance remnants)***, 2007/2018  
Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop (Terri Littleton, Jason Food)  
Performance with sugar, sand, coffee, and tobacco  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

the same today as we were yesterday? William and Gil/Taller Workshop explore an unmoored understanding of self through their hybrid identities as Haitian American and Cuban American, respectively. In many ways, this multiplicity defies categorization as they are at once fully American and fully Haitian or Cuban, while at times leaning towards one or the other, or neither. This duality of being both/and is inherent to the immigrant experience, inflecting everyday life in a new place with memories of home and questions of cultural belonging. Multiplicity and malleability within identity are central concepts to the works in *SWARM*. as the artists navigate between media, printmaking and sculpture, materials and meanings—high and low, impermeable and ephemeral, and personal and historical.

#### **Note from the field #4: *SWARM*. Process**

The materials and processes of the works in the exhibition themselves emerge as agents of *SWARM*. Both William and Gil/Taller Workshop's processes and materials are defined by the interplay between labor and movement. Their multilayered processes, between various media “swarms” or transforms the focus from medium specificity to encompass medium and material multiplicity.

William builds the surfaces of his wood panels through a process of staining and sanding, creating opacity and texture, which allows the grain—or what he describes as the “primal brushstroke”—to emerge. William also layers collage and printmaking techniques in works such as *Ma tante toya* and *Bois Caïman* in order to distance the source of each mark and image from its origin, thereby using his prints and unconventional materials as an analogy for the necessary restaging of life in African diaspora.

Gil/Taller Workshop uses surprising materials—inner tube rubber, spark plugs, votive candles, butterflies, tobacco leaves, rice and beans—and alters them to create woven blankets, rosaries, and suspensions. In his collaborative practice with his expansive network, Gil/Taller Workshop uses printmaking techniques to

heighten the movement of materials by placing objects directly onto a substrate to achieve different values and textures in works such as *chrysalis* and *ala hala (Oshun)*. For Gil/Taller Workshop, sculpture and print are physical, process-oriented media, which offer a conduit for exploring movement, memory, and loss or what the artist describes as “acts of passage.”

#### **Note from the field #5: *SWARM*. Affect**

To acknowledge the constant negotiation of identity, the malleable and multi-layered processes, the complicated revolutionary histories, and the possibilities of powerful spiritual traditions creates affective or emotional responses that are inherent in the migratory experience. William and Gil/Taller Workshop both heighten the imperative “to swarm” that is simultaneously threatening and enveloping. The heavy weight of Gil/Taller Workshop's *chrysalis* and *Princesa Demoleus*, coupled with William's cacophony of “swarming” eyes, bodies, and language in *We Will Win* and *Quiet Time*, evoke a variety of emotions such as pride, fear, hope, longing, and nostalgia, for those who embark on migratory journeys and who live in diaspora.

**A post-note:** When defined at the outset of these notes, to “swarm” means to converge and to confront en masse—period; and ultimately, this convergence of histories, beliefs, identities, emotions, and processes envision parts of a larger collective reimagination that we and the artists welcome. But as with all notes, these are incomplete. They teem with possibility for further study, carry with them the desire to resonate, multiply, and collect meanings, and we welcome the opportunity for others to continue to annotate these notes.

# SWARM.

DIDIER WILLIAM and NESTOR ARMANDO GIL/TALLER WORKSHOP

To "swarm" is to move, to converge, to confront an issue—period. The work of artist Didier William and Nestor Armando Gil/Taller Workshop involves research, site immersion, through the production of a period, to physically and metaphorically "swarm" historical and contemporary manifestations of colonialism in order to disrupt systems of political, economic, and cultural control. This takes various forms throughout the exhibition—questioning, challenging, measuring, and transcribing—in "swarming" configurations, such as evolutions, identity, spirituality, process, and affect, which create ripple effects of empathy and connection, and forge kinship across diaspora, or the dispersal of people from their homelands.

Both artists' practices are informed by the personal and spiritual histories of their families and Cuban heritage as well as the diasporic communities they call home in the United States. Their experiential work explores and engages the possibilities of history, connections, and histories of the Cuban and Haitian diaspora but also the boundaries amongst communities across the world. Didier William and Gil/Taller Workshop engage with their heritage and history, they also offer viewers opportunities to explore the formation of diaspora personal and collective identity in life in diaspora.

SWARM. is organized by PPK Assistant Curator Laurel McLaughlin, and guest curator Meredith Sternberg. The exhibition will be on view through September 27 throughout the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' Rivers, Leachman Building.





# IMAGINARY HOMELANDS

An Interview with Didier William

Monday, March 19, 2018 and Monday, April 2, 2018

*Over the course of several conversations, Didier shared his multifaceted practice with us in his studio at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), where he is Chair of the MFA Program and Associate Professor. The walls of his studio were covered with wood panels in varying stages of completion—the mere, yet pregnant outlines of bulbous figures, hordes of swarming eyes, and collage elements, prints, and patterns, waiting to be embedded into the panels.*

**Mechella Yezernitskaya:** Thank you for joining us for this interview. We would like to start by asking you about your artistic influences. You have spoken about Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Lewis, Robert Colescott, Sigmar Polke, and Belkis Ayón as key influences. Can you talk about the elements you find most influential in their work including the pour, color, and collage, and how those elements all figure into the works in *SWARM*.?

**Didier William:** They definitely do figure into the works in *SWARM*. They're the first body of work that brought back the symbolic in my paintings. Prior to that I was much more interested in process, or process as it gave way to content. Once I began making work that eventually led to *SWARM*., I felt like the graphic symbolism started to work its way back into my work. I still maintained some of the research that I made while I was doing that process work and that's when I was looking at people like Belkis Ayón. Prior to that, I was trying to find my painting language and my painting surface through people like Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, whose paintings were so material but the characteristics of materiality were very much part of the content. It is in the same way that the characteristics of the mate-

riality of collage are very much part of the content of collage. This kind of implication of space achieved through layering, that for me, even though not technically connected to Belkis Ayón's process, were the mythological constructions that she worked with, and I related to that material very much. Polke, on a very deliberate printmaking level, is a forefather. And then there was Colescott, with the varying speeds in his paintings, the fecund and deeply political narratives he worked with that preceded many of us who work with this content contemporarily...his incredible color, the structural information that these paintings are embedded with...which of course comes from his time studying with Fernand Léger.

I think all of that weaves its way into the fantastical spaces I construct. It has always been important to me not to observe a space and then make it, but to construct a space that still has the cohesion and presence of a lived space—to bring the paintings back to current time. All of these artists, Colescott, Polke, Frankenthaler, Louis, and Ayón, in the way they talk about space, as being an ever-evolving, completely fluid entity but still present, were useful.

**Laurel V. McLaughlin:** I'm curious how your other bodies of work, such as "Camouflage," "Gravity," "Rhythm," and "Friction," figure into "SWARM." for you.

**DW:** I consider them as organizational strategies. Each of those were different but they all led up to *SWARM*. I think my work reinvented itself four or five times after graduate school. That time was incredibly disorienting and confusing but I think it was all leading up to this body of work. It was all me spending two, three years at a

time putting together the building blocks that would essentially make this body of work of which is *SWARM*. That work was a prequel to this work. In all the different constituent parts from those bodies of work have roots in here, you can see them in here. Even work that I was making as an undergrad, it was all black and brown, and I was rubbing onto the surface in a kind of reductive process of pulling paint away. I still look at that work and I can see it as an ancestor to this work.

**LM:** This idea of movement and growth in between series and in between media seems as though you were interested in occupying a liminal space, both formally and psychologically.

**DW:** It's part of what we do as unconventional people with unconventional stories who deal in unconventional spaces. When your practice, history, and identity aren't part of the institutional canon, you come up with other strategies for finding agency, and so you take materials and tools that are not typical and turn them into something more substantial, meaningful, and present. For me, it was in switching to materials such as wood, staining, and hardware that felt more familiar.

**MY:** Returning to that idea of liminality in a more personal context, can you talk about your immigration story and the ways in which you've moved across spaces? How did that create some kinship with Nestor Armando Gil, with whom you're collaborating for the exhibition *SWARM*?

**DW:** I think the kinship is mostly in this idea that we both operate from what we know as an imaginary of our homelands and we accept it as an imaginary.

In terms of my immigration story, my parents worked for the American Embassy in Haiti. That's how we were able to get visas rather easily compared to others. My mom and my oldest brother left first and moved to D.C., and then my dad, my second oldest brother, and I came after. We moved to South Florida where we all grew up and went to school. I think I was in a hurry to become American. Maybe because I was six years old and it was a pretty formative stage at the time. I learned English pretty quickly in about three months. I started school immediately and acclimated more easily than my older brothers did so much so that they still have accents and are culturally more Haitian than I am. Coupled with all of that, in the backdrop was a larger condition in Miami that pitted Haitians and Cubans against one another.



**Fig. 1**  
**Azil Politik**, 2017  
Didier William [b. 1983]  
Collage cut paper  
26 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

A little bit further in the background I was beginning to be aware of my identity as a queer person. All of this stuff enabled me to become hyperaware of how my body was read in different spaces and how I was responding when that reading would take place—whether I would become reactive either outwardly or internally. I stayed in Miami until grade school and remained closeted. I left Miami to go to the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore where I started to become hyperaware of what it meant to be a big, bearded, bald, black guy. The work immediately began to take on an autobiographical tone of mostly brown and black rubbings. I dug deeper into that in my time as an undergrad. I read Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) and had a little bit of a breakdown because I felt that it was so specific. It was the first thing that I read that seemed to be describing my experience and to this day it is still one of the most formative experiences I've ever had since beginning the personal and historical research for this work.

As an undergrad several pivotal courses began to shape my practice including Third World Women Writers, which was a course dedicated to women writers from Third World countries. We read several amazing texts in that class, and then I took an independent study with the same professor, Soheila Ghaussy, on Caribbean women writers so we put together a syllabus of Jamaica Kincaid, Elizabeth Nunez, and Maryse Condé. All of these women wrote fiction and novels about the Caribbean that brought in its history, the slave trade, mythological history, Vodou and other worship rituals. In that moment, I was beginning the conversation around postcoloniality and the transnational imaginary. When I got to graduate school, I continued that work with Christopher Miller and Hazel Carby, focusing on racial formations in a class called Transnational Imaginaries. In my time with Hazel, I began to think about the language around gender as part and

parcel to the ways in which the body is read in the postcolonial construct and imaginary. At that point, towards the tail end of grad school, all of this stuff was cooking in the studio and I still had no way to resolve it; and in hindsight, I'm glad I didn't because the work wasn't ready.

**The work in  
*SWARM*. is not  
just about  
race, it's about  
identifying or  
naming the  
container for  
the body and  
whatever form  
that container  
might take.**

And so the work in *SWARM*. is not just about race, it's about identifying or naming the container for the body and whatever form that container might take. I'm interested in deconstructing that container as we talk about historical narratives. If we assertively name the container, what does that do to the narrative held near and dear and positioned in the historical archive? If we identify this container as an artificial construct, as an artificial device, what then happens to the historical narrative? I think that's the preeminent question in the work, and it's a question that I think I'm just arriving at and that I've barely scratched the surface.

**LM:** You've narrated this rich prehistory to *SWARM*., so I'm curious as to what actually brought you and Nestor together?

**DW:** Curlee Raven Holton. I took my students to the Experimental Printmaking Institute (EPI) at Lafayette College, Easton, PA to see the shop and the prints. Curlee is the founding director of EPI. When we were up there, we were walking around and Curlee introduced me to Nestor and said that Nestor teaches sculpture at Lafayette and so Nestor and I started talking and Curlee disappears. Nestor and I were talking in his studio, realizing we have a lot in common. Curlee comes back and says, "so when are ya'll doing a show together?" That day, we jokingly made a preliminary plan to collaborate and slowly but surely solidified something more substantial. I think Curlee reached out to Mikhaile Solomon, the founder and director of Prizm Art Fair, to direct *SWARM*. during Art Basel in Miami. Mikhaile liked the project and took it on.



**Plate 3**  
***Bois Caïman***, 2017  
Didier William (b. 1983)  
Collage, acrylic, and wood carving on panel  
48 x 60 in.  
Collection of Robert and Frances Coulborn Kohler

We kept working and over the next year Nestor and I had this really great friendship and organic relationship mostly through texting and sending images and stories back and forth. We don't plan anything; we don't make a script. We just show up and kind of bounce ideas back and forth, which is nice.

**LM:** As you say, you share this kinship with Nestor through the idea of a diasporic imaginary but then you both reference concrete moments in history. You recall colonial histories of Haiti in works like *Azil Politik*, *Bois Caïman*, and *Ma tante toya* and we're curious what form that history takes in your works (*Fig. 1, p. 10; Fig. 2, p. 9; plate 3, p. 12*). For instance, scholar Jerry Philogene references your historically-inflected patterns as creating an interconnected matrix. Could you talk about this notion of the matrix and how it negotiates history in your work?

**DW:** I think for all of us in the diaspora, history and narrative become a porous membrane, that is completely non-linear. Maybe matrix is the right word, but I like to think of it as a completely porous membrane that we kind of slip in and out of and are sometimes forced in and out of. There is nothing linear about it and I think that is the only way to find agency as someone whose construction of home is elsewhere. That's the only way to find grounding, to look critically at the historical devices that have shaped the way one's body is read. I don't know how to do it any other way.

**MY:** I like this idea of the porous membrane because everything is in flux; there is no layer that you have to go through first, instead it's all happening all at once. By extension, one's identity is negotiated within this porous membrane. Growing up Haitian American, you also enter a culture of blackness in America, which you inevitably experience by having that read upon you in social space. With these numerous layers of complexity to your identity as experienced in everyday life, can you talk about what it means for you to navigate these identities in the diaspora of South Florida and beyond to Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia?

**DW:** It's yet another example of how fluid and non-monolithic blackness is because it's an adopted history. My identity as an African American is an adopted history; my identity as a black man is a history that comes with the territory. But blackness is a hinge in both of those



**Fig. 2**  
*Ma tante Toya*, 2017  
Didier William [b. 1983]  
Collage, wood carving and ink on panel  
64 x 50 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

conditions. Blackness as a construction that is in direct response to whiteness as a construction. The negotiation is constant and often happens in an instant. It begins as soon as the politics of encounter start to take place between me and an interlocutor (who doesn't know that I am also Haitian American and that there is this other history that's affected my blackness) the same way that American history has affected my blackness.

I think the revolution comes into that because not only is Haiti punished by the international community for achieving the goal of black self actualization, but also for maintaining its proximity to African traditions and roots defiantly, which is also a mortal sin in the eyes of the international community. Haiti has never been ashamed of its African roots, and for that reason Haiti is punished repeatedly by those who think that black skin needs to be diminished or dismissed. In thinking about how blackness was going to be visualized or verbalized as a container in the work, going to the revolution was a no-brainer.

**LM:** We've discussed some of the layers of your identity, which are represented in this body of work. Mechella and I try to flesh out these various stratifications through analogous points that you and Nestor share in the exhibition. These range from the history of revolution in Haiti and Cuba, the malleable artistic processes that you both employ, to the spiritual threads that run throughout your work. I want to focus on this last point for a moment. How do you see religion, such as Vodou, figuring into works such as *Marassa Jumeaux* and *Ezili toujours konnen* and how does this open up other facets of your identity (**Fig. 3, p. 16; Fig. 4, p. 17**)?

**DW:** I take them as history. It's almost like an act of restorative justice on my part to insist that some of the containers that I referred to earlier that define the ways we read these bodies as insufficient—that they're insufficient because we've intentionally left out other parts of history and identity formation, such as Vodou. Vodou is, in my mind, a way of correcting that historical discrepancy. That's where Haiti's self-actualization took place, by becoming connected to the ritualistic history, by

becoming connected to the land, and to each other. Haitians were able to achieve the thing that so many were not able to achieve at the time. There is a part of me that likes to think of this strategy as an act of restorative justice in the work.

**MY:** In addition to the history that you are restoring, you are also restoring your personal history; and I'm thinking of *Bois Caïman* where you use the silhouettes of your brother and nephew from family photographs. These personal figures along with the objects of your upbringing such as textiles and beaded curtains dominate the picture plane. In turn, there is a sense of agency that thrives in your use of these source materials. Can you speak more about this potent and powerful reclamation of your personal archive?

**DW:** We left so much behind when we left Haiti. The vast majority of photographs, clothing, sheets, dishes, all the things that you accumulate in the decades that you build a family, we left behind because we didn't have much room. With the exception of a few items, most of our history was left behind. And so in my mind there is a part of the work that attempts to rebuild that history through patterning, surface, material, texture, and family photographs that I can access and put together to try to fill a gap that is there. We don't have any pictures from when I was younger than five years old; we left them all in Haiti and my mother's attempt to try to get them since we've been here have been futile. There is a part of me that really fetishizes family photography and the family history of photography.

One of the only reasons why I understand color when it comes to material is specifically because of that. So much of those materials were gone and left that I want to see color as texture, I want to see color drape over my hand and through my fingers to understand the potency of that blue because the ways in which that blue signals in my mind that kind of memory and history were essentially taken away and left behind and I want to refill that psychological space. That's how I think about this material when I find it. With *Bois Caïman*, I held onto that photograph for five years until I knew what it was going to become. It's almost like

finding a historical artifact and waiting for it to become relevant.

**LM:** There is an element of emotional labor involved in this act of restorative justice. How else do you see your labor in your work, specifically in your process?

**DW:** It is very physical work. I am the child of immigrants and my dad is a retired mechanic and a cook. My mom has been a chef her entire life and now has a restaurant and she refuses to retire. Somewhere along the line, the meaning and value of labor—independent of its outcome—was somehow implanted in me and maybe in many ways that's why I have searched for a painting language that required a certain amount of labor. The physical relationship I have with the materials and the way it gets performed through a kind of labor is just as much part of the content. Whether or not that labor is extended over a month and a half to complete the work or two days.

Wrestling with the surface of the panel has become important to me. There is something about it that I enjoy; there is an element of sadomasochism in wanting to leave the studio exhausted. Again, because I grew up watching my parents come home exhausted and I knew there was a very distinctly different relationship to labor they had that their white counterparts didn't. The way in which they found meaning through their labor, even on an unconscious level, was pumped into me whether they knew it or not. If I try to locate where this relationship to labor comes from, I think that would be the source.

**MY:** What tools do you use to achieve this value of labor in your work?

**DW:** Among other things, I use buckets, wood carving tools, sand paper, squeegees, green scrubbies, card stock, foam brushes, towels, and paper towels. I remember

Mark Bradford once said: "If they sell it in Home Depot, then I probably use it in my paintings." I feel the same exact way.

I feel like forcing myself to use materials that are not meant for precision actually allows me to be more precise. It's one thing if I go out and buy fine hair brushes and all that kind of stuff, things that are intended for fine detail work and deploy them for what they're intended to be used. But if what I have at my disposal is an old t-shirt, a bucket, and paint, how do I get the same amount of detail? In so doing, it forces my hand to become even more facile in manipulating that material, manipulating that tool to get it to do what I want it to do, which is really what drives a lot of this work. How do I take something that doesn't want to behave in a particular way and make it do what I want? Because that on a formal, physical, process level is just as interesting to me and is as much a part of the content as the personal stuff.

**LM:** From the substrate of your materials to your immigrant identity, it seems as though you're calling upon both to be malleable.

**DW:** Well, the show is called *SWARM*. and there is an imperative attached to that. The fluidity of one's physical limits needs to be part of the entire process from the tools to the conceptual strategy. That is just as much where this impulse to pick random shit and turn them into painting tools comes from.

**MY:** How does your choice of media such as print and collage contribute to the role of labor, invention, and movement?

**DW:** With printmaking, you have to think backwards, reframe your mind and think about how an image comes together in layers and in reverse, which I love.

## The fluidity of one's physical limits needs to be part of the entire process

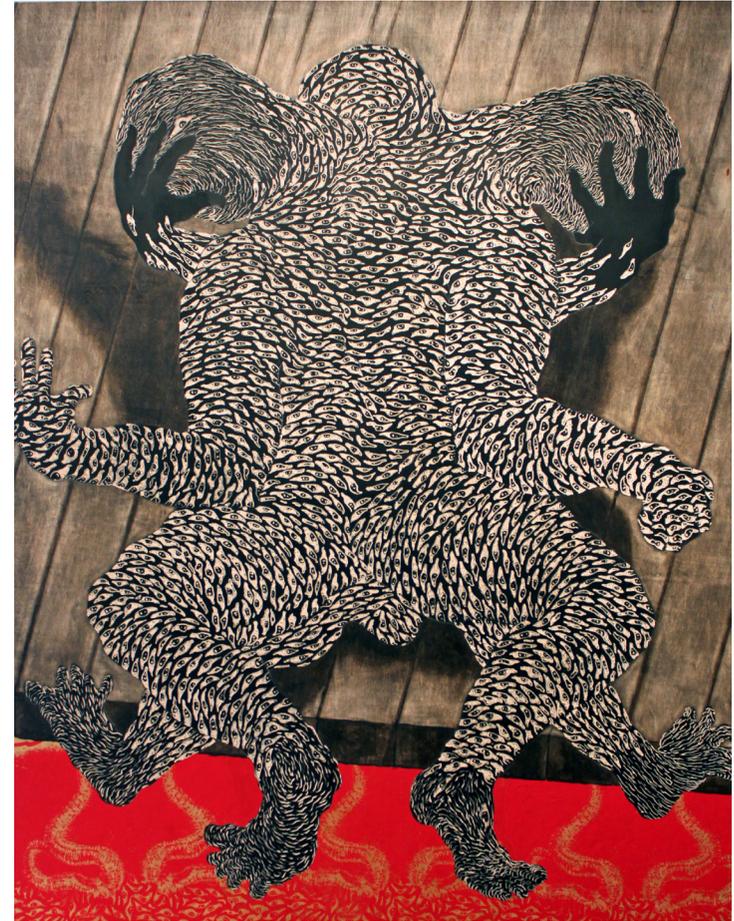
For some reason, printmaking seemed like a beautiful analogy for moving to one place while having history from another place and only ever getting fleeting impressions of things. Space is never resolved, your body is never resolved, and your body's relationship to a space is never resolved. Ideas of home continue to change, and relationships are always fleeting. The layering made a lot of sense to me, the layered way in which atmosphere is never resolved but this series of layers that come together and you perpetually try to make sense out of. In print, the resolution comes through the paper that you are printing with, and that materiality is always present and so it made sense to me that when I arrived at print, it was the perfect language to embed these ideas but to also reassociate these ideas to painting. I see print as a kind of intermediary between drawing and painting.

**LM:** It's so interesting that you connect print as a medium to the immigrant experience because usually it's linked to its affordability and reproducibility in this context, but it's also so much more. It's a fleeting impression and a literal representation of memory.

**DW:** And, print is also talked about as this democratic quality and its use in activism, but there is also a structural and purposeful integrity that works really well.

Collage also has its Dadaist, political roots, and I am still very much interested in that. I also think that collage is a material reiteration of space being a layered process more than a resolved whole. Collage reaffirms that, and it presents itself to the viewer as a necessary fragment. It doesn't pretend to be anything but fragmented parts attempting to come together, but failing to come together and so along with printmaking, the two together speak so eloquently to this conversation that felt so appropriate. Resolved rational spaces are not the privilege, moving through space in a kind of totemic fashion where each material is itself present, real, felt, and honest but sometimes their disharmonies are more interesting than their harmonies. The postcolonial site is in a sense a kind of socio-political disharmony. If an analogy can be drawn between that and collage, that's super interesting for me and the surfaces of the paintings attempt to do that.

**MY:** Since immigrating to South Florida, have you been back to Haiti?



**Fig. 3**  
*Marassa Jumeaux*, 2017  
Didier William (b. 1983)  
Wood carving, ink, and collage on panel  
60 x 48 in.  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Museum Purchase, 2018.3

**DW:** I haven't. I plan to. My parents have been back three times since we left but my brothers and I haven't. Mostly because when we were young and we were in school, I don't think my parents wanted to disrupt our lives, but now that we're older they're essentially like, "Do what you want." Both my brothers have full lives—and I certainly have my hands full—and so we just need to find the right time. It's also going to be interesting to go back with the life that I have now to a country that I barely know. I'm interested in it but it's probably going to be the most potent and most involved version of finding one of those photographs. It's going to be an intense psychological experience. In part, I think I'm just prepping myself.

**MY:** I'd like to bring *SWARM.* back to where we are today at PAFA, an institution which is committed to promoting American art from the historical era to the present and one that is redefining what it means to be an American with recent and upcoming exhibitions. How do you envision *SWARM.* occupying that institutional narrative and how do you wish for it to be received by people who are entering an institution known for American art?

**DW:** That's a hard question. I think *SWARM.* is deeply invested in a sort of political moment where black people are naming themselves, and the history of this country has never been acquiescent to black people naming themselves. So to that end, I think it is a pretty amazing move to have this dialogue that is so central to *SWARM.* at an institution that has committed itself to American art because it calls specifically into question what it means to be American at this particular time, which I think is critical. I'm very interested in seeing what kind of dialogue it produces because I don't know what kind of implications come with naming oneself as an American institution or what kind of boundaries it implies or what kind of histories it tries to locate because as we know the history of this country is incredibly polymorphous. Particularly when the Haitian Revolution occurred, slave owners in the U.S. began to rewrite laws because they didn't want what happened in this small country in the Caribbean to happen here. They were afraid of the possibility model extending beyond the Caribbean. And so all of that for me is super interesting and digging deeper into what it means to be an American and really sinking your teeth into this idea of what it means to be an American. I'm excited about all of that. I'm provoked by all of that.



**Fig. 4**  
*Ezili toujours konnen*, 2015  
Didier William [b. 1983]  
Ink and collage on panel  
48 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

And then, how does the work get received? I'm not sure, I think PAFA is an institution that for a large part of its history has committed itself to thinking about the body and how the body is imaged, which is great but the nude as a historical and conceptual device has always on some level been a means of erasure. The bodies that I'm interested in here have no interest in being erased. They're bulbous, assertive, larger-than-life, and they return the curious gaze that attempts to consume them. I'm also interested in these bodies reacting to an implication of an emptied out repository for a curious observer. They resist that. And they resist that with every square inch of themselves. That I think is an interesting dialogue.

**MY:** Even in the Historic Landmark Building, the Cast Hall is inviting that non-reciprocal, curious gaze. We, the viewers, have control, whereas in your work, that control is problematized. We are being confronted with the curious gaze.

**DW:** And, the gaze in the Cast Hall is a rigid system, a calcified archaic system. The gaze that I am referring to is a fluid and elastic back and forth that really is so layered that it begins to define space. The space between me and my interlocutor has everything to do with how we engage, read, and contain one another back and forth almost infinitely throughout our encounter. These figures and eyes are an attempt to make that process physical and visible and to extend what happens in a millisecond and to extend it into an experience.



**Plate 4**  
***Quiet Time***, 2017  
Didier William (b. 1983)  
Ink and wood carving on panel  
18 x 24 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



# “THE ONLY PLACE WE’VE EVER BEEN FREE IS ON THE FLORIDA STRAITS”

An Interview with Nestor Armando Gil/Taller Workshop

Friday, February 23, 2018 and Sunday, April 22, 2018

*We met Nestor Armando Gil and collaborator Clark Addis in Nestor’s studio at Lafayette College, an airy, light-filled space with the faint smell of coffee and tobacco. Nestor’s workstation is replete with tobacco leaves, and spark plugs peek out from boxes overhead. He invites us to sit down and talk about SWARM, but warns us that our conversation might be scattered across various locales, from his studio to his home, because he’s entertaining guests and we are welcomed to join the festivities.*

**Laurel V. McLaughlin:** Could you tell us about your artistic education and how it led to your current position at Lafayette College, Easton, PA?

**Nestor Armando Gil:** I didn’t really have one. I was a kid who didn’t do art, or if I did, I was discouraged because my ability to match conception and execution began to fall apart at that middle school age when things like that start to happen. But I thought I would be a poet and an English teacher. I went to college thinking I’d study theater, literature, and writing, and I dropped out. Eventually I dropped back in. And here we’re starting to get closer to my artistic education.

There had been a sculpture class at community college during my drop in/drop out

years and I’d failed since I’d never gone. Years later, after being married to this girl I know, I decided that I should finish my education and I dropped back in. So I took the class again in order to fix the grade I’d gotten so I could go on to a good school. And sculpture just really won my heart.

I graduated college and became a high school English teacher, and I continued my history of doing performance and spoken word and poetry as I’d been doing all through my youth. In 2005, Brandi, that’s the given name of this girl I know, finished graduate school. Brandi wanted to go back to work teaching as a special education teacher, so I stopped teaching high school and stayed home with our daughter, Harvest, who was two. During the two years that I was home with Harvest, I turned my shed into a studio—that’s the studio where *Boca (Your Memories Are My Myths)* was first performed (**Fig. 1**). During that time I decided that I was going to go to graduate school and it was going to be for art and not for words. The first year I applied nothing good happened. The next year I applied only to University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and I got in and earned an MFA in studio art there. It was very wide open in terms of media and discipline. After that a fellowship at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine gave me more experience teaching and professionalized my art practice. I went on the job market. The first



**Fig. 1**  
***Boca (Your Memories Are My Myths)***, 2007/2018  
Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop  
Performance with sugar, sand, coffee, tobacco  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

year again, not a lot of good. The following year when my fellowship was ending at Bowdoin, a position here at Lafayette was among those I was offered. That was 7 years ago.

**Mechella Yezernitskaya:** Who are some of your artistic influences? I can imagine they are wide-ranging, from artists to poets to writers.

**NAG:** It's such a great question, especially when you open it up beyond just artists. The performance artists of the late 60s and early 70s, obviously Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, and Ana Mendieta—in part because she was Cuban and I went looking for more information—and in part because of the ridiculous story with Carl Andre, (that whole thing is so offensive to me), but I became very fascinated with her. I've done nothing but learn from her since I started looking at her work a long time ago. Tehching Hsieh, who did the one-year performances, he's always been someone that I go back to and he's someone that I teach. Félix González-Torres. Oh my god, Félix! I think that artists that I teach probably are artists who I admire a great deal. I also love the work of spoken word artist and host of NPR's podcast *Reveal*, Al Letson—brilliant man and incredible artist, as a host and a performer. He's just stellar and he inspires me in many ways.

I love the Imagist poets like William Carlos Williams. I don't love their politics most of the time but their work is great. I love that Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson kicked the shit out of English poetry and turned poetry into something new. I love that the modernist poets revealed that it wasn't new at all, just old stuff made new—the idea of everything being traced. Anywhere that I find evidence of that thinking in any discipline, I'm really attracted to that. I love the Beats. I love the books of Reinaldo Arenas, who's a Cuban writer who wrote *Before Night Falls*. And the list goes on and on. You know, Pablo Neruda, Wanda Coleman. My teenage self got an e.e. cummings quote tattooed around his ankle.

**LM:** From our previous conversations, you said that your family's immigration story

influences your outlook on life, in addition to art. Could you recount this narrative for us?

**NAG:** I was born in the United States. The real story is the generation before me—the generation of my parents. They were sweethearts in high school. They met because my father went to school in La Habana near the school that my mom attended—a boy's Catholic school next to a girl's Catholic school. They became sweethearts and then the Revolution came in '59. In '61, my mom's parents, so my grandparents, sent my mother and her sister to Spain, to Barcelona. My mom went there and found work cleaning house for these people and then later she worked in their office. She attended university. She lived in a house that was supervised by the same nuns who ran their school in Cuba. So they were watched over by these sisters of the cloth. Very Catholic moves from my parents.

My grandfather had been a Professor of Law at La Universidad de La Habana [The University of Havana] while many of the revolutionaries attended university there. After the Revolution they asked him about his views. He opted to finish his career in Venezuela and lectured there until he died. And that's where he's buried. My grandmother then moved to Spain to be closer to her daughters. In '63 my father was going to leave Cuba for the United States with his brothers who left in '63 and settled in Philadelphia, but my father was incarcerated, and he wasn't able to get off the island. He left the island two years later in '65 by going to Mexico where he stayed until his brothers sent him a ticket to travel to the United States. He joined them in Philadelphia for a little while. Then he joined the Navy. He'd been telling my mother to come to the United States through a series of love letters that lasted all this time. He sent a photograph of himself next to his car with the words "I love Carmen" painted on the door. Like this is *the* Latino love story, right? I've painted your name on a car! My mom came to the United States and they met up in Atlanta. My dad told my grandmother, "I'm going to take her to Jacksonville for a while and then we'll get married." My grandmother refused to allow her unmarried daughter to leave Atlanta with a man. They got married in Atlanta and moved to

Jacksonville. He served two tours in Vietnam and they raised five children while finishing school and becoming schoolteachers. My grandmother moved in and lived with us for our entire lives until she died, in her bed, in our house.

**LM:** Was your father considered a dissident?

**NAG:** Yes, he was. Before the Revolution he and my mom, both young, sold July 26 bonds in support of the Revolution because Fulgencio Batista was bad, but as the Revolution came closer and after it happened, they both became disillusioned with it. They were with it and then they were against it—they were in a space where a lot of Cubans were. And so my father by '63 was out there on the basketball court and was getting ready to leave the island, and, as a young man, he was talking too much, and someone heard some things and reported him. A couple of days later he and some friends got round up and taken to jail. That was right when he was due to leave with his brothers. His visa was revoked and he was not able to leave. When he finally did, his dad said, "Don't come back." And he didn't. But before my father died, I had been traveling to Cuba, weirdly with his blessing—since before that it had always been this *thing*—don't go back while communism is in Cuba. Then he changed his tune on that and he wanted me to go back and see family and bring pictures.

**MY:** Didier told us that he hasn't been back to Haiti since emigrating at a young age, but he plans on going back. Could you talk about your experience of returning to Cuba?

**NAG:** It wasn't a return for me. But the second and third times were returns to a place I'd visited. It's crazy how much like an American I feel there, but in the United States I feel so Cuban—it's an identity that I'm proud of. Maybe because as a kid it was something I was attacked for so as an adult I became obstinately proud

of it. I have a lot of family there and I've been able to meet them and it's strange to meet people that—you know with my brothers and sisters, I haven't quite the same features as them—but then I meet someone and they look like a 65-year-old version of me and to see that I'm a Gil and a Carmona. To hear stories about my grandmother—that part of it was profoundly moving because you're touching parts of yourself that you knew were there in the abstract but here they are in concrete terms.

And the other thing is—I can't believe how big Cuba is. It only really dawned on me going there in January for the third time as we arrived and looked at the coastline going off into forever. I thought, man, this place is huge. It's the biggest Caribbean island—and again, I knew all of these things in the abstract. Everything I'd learned about Cuba all of my life was abstract—I could hold it *right there*. I only realized that it's a physical place, now. Before that it was just an idea. An idea can be gigantic but you can hold it in your brain, you don't need geography to hold it.

I think that when ideas like this are out there and we're putting it in the world through discussion, creative work, I think that it also speaks to what I imagine is a distinctly New World or American identity, which is mostly people who can trace back a few generations—people who think this land that is my land is *not my land*. And that feeling of—it's like when you pull a rubber band and you keep pulling it, first generation Americans like you and I are there [points to barely-stretched rubber band] and we feel this tension, and part of the tension that we feel is that we're so close to relaxed that we can want it, but when the rubber band has been pulled all the way out to here, people may not want that relaxed feeling because they may not know what it is, but it's not less stretched, it's not less tense, right? The person who's ten generations into being an American is only further pulled and taut. And there's something beautiful about looking back, and I'm not saying that's what should

**An idea can be  
gigantic but  
you can hold it  
in your brain,  
you don't need  
geography to  
hold it.**



**Plate 5**  
***Cuando Papi Flew and Took El Cielo and El Mar with Him***, 2018  
Nestor Armando Gil [b. 1971]/Taller Workshop  
*Papilio demoleus* butterflies, inner tube rubber,  
and spark plugs  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

determine us as people since who we are right now tells more about us than who our parents are or were. But that rubber band gets tighter and tighter and tighter, and there's something about being wrapped up in identity of the New World—a product of colonialism. There's something about it that's just part and parcel of longing, *I think*.

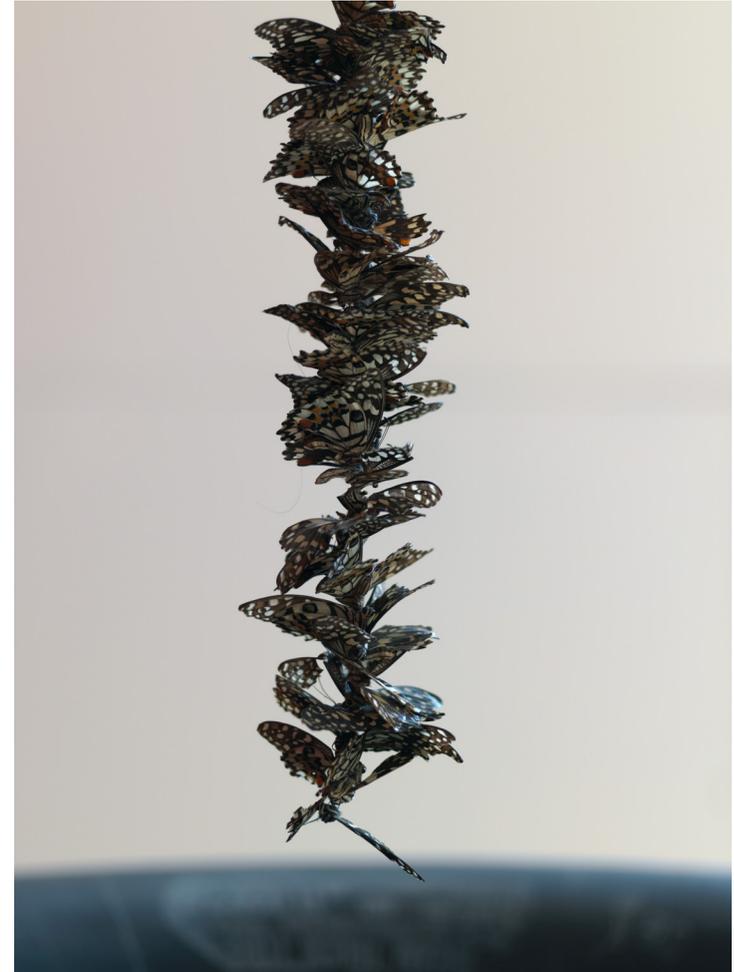
**LM:** As you've explained, to some small extent, we can all identify to that longing that you've described by virtue of the nature of America—that it's a country of immigrants. Along those communal lines, Clark [a member of Taller Workshop], I wonder if we could switch gears slightly since I'd like for you to tell us about Taller Workshop as a collective. Who is in this workshop and how do you function together? What are your processes, practices, and collective thinking?

**Clark Addis:** The role of Nestor's studio assistant wanes in and out and can really be any person. For example, Nestor wanted me to cut little strips of rubber in order to knit, but someone else had already cut up the tires, so I have to continue. Same with the spark plugs, someone had already printed them and painted them. I had to rediscover their processes and then make it my own. I have to pick it up from someone else and then leave it so that someone can pick it up after me. It's almost like I didn't have any interaction in the world, but I still created something. It could be me, but it could be someone else. For instance, multiple people made *Cuando Papi Flew and Took El Cielo and El Mar with Him* (**Plate 5; p. 25**). It was a collaborative process because I put up a first draft with a few pieces of inner tube with spark plugs on the wall and it kept expanding and expanding every time someone would work on it. It's a combination of both of us going through and iterating.

**NAG:** That answer is why it's a workshop.

**CA:** That's the way you get there with these tiny steps around the edge of knowledge.

**LM:** You outlined really nicely what it's like to work with the materials, but I'm curious what it's like to work with the concepts that Nestor is engaging with—the content concerns migratory history that is perhaps not your own. What is it like to work with those ideas? Because in a sense that's what you're asking the viewer to do when they're looking at the work.



**Plate 6**  
***Princesa Demoleus* (detail), 2018**  
Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop  
*Papilio demoleus* butterflies and inner tube rubber  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

**CA:** I'm always learning how to empathize. Maybe that makes better art because I'm learning how to empathize with a set of experiences and ideas that aren't my own.

**LM:** It seems that we're always negotiating identity, whether it's ours or our interaction with the identities of others.

**NAG:** Something that you said, Clark, about trying to engage your empathy with someone else's. I think that when something is really personal, sometimes there's the forest and the trees, like when my own ability to see what I'm up to becomes very tunnel-like. Engaging with people who I trust to be vigilant with their empathies means that these ideas get processed and approached beyond myself. It presents me with other ways of thinking.

I see it as very intimate and personal working with this group! There are other people that are part of this workshop: Lola Wegman, Terri Littleton, Jason Food. We continue to have conversations around these ideas because the contributions they've made, like the contributions that Clark has made, become part of what you're showing at PAFA. Some people like Emily Beck and Kelly Goff are colleagues of mine at other institutions who facilitated parts of the work and through that act, we get into conversations about the work that lead to new directions and levels of authorship. When those lines get blurred, I add them to the workshop. It might be as simple as giving access, but that's important. In the case of Lola or Clark, because we work together so often, the engagement becomes more pronounced and informative. The way that some of the work is shown comes directly from the minds of other people, then processed through this cheese grater [points to his head], then whatever happens in the space contributes as well. In my mind, each role is so much more than a cog in a machine.

**If white was  
a seat at the  
table and black  
was looking  
through the  
window, Latino  
was the glass.  
Present but  
invisible.**

**CA:** We bring things and we leave things for others.

**MY:** You're unconsciously leaving traces and you're unconsciously taking them with you. You're all interconnected, much like the installation *Nube (Imaginary Lands)*, in that it is this imaginary kind of workshop where people are connected not only in the studio but also away from the studio. You're expanding the workshop beyond the studio.

**NAG:** It's a post-studio workshop. There are some people who come here physically and engage, and others who I work with via telephone, e-mail, and snail mail. So it's constant and fluid. None of it is solely mine.

**MY:** In the spirit of connectivity, Didier spoke of the connection you both shared when Curlee Raven Holton brought you two together. Didier described the collaboration as rooted in both of your understandings of the homeland as an imaginary, but also the reality of his family having to relearn how to navigate this new space and how their bodies were read as "different" in the United States. How do you think these Caribbean and diasporic familial histories contributed to *SWARM*?

**NAG:** I should add about my family's story that so much of it was informed by being Cubans in the Deep South, Jacksonville, rather than Miami. In Miami, there was a critical mass of Cubans and Latinxs that allowed for a cultural sense of belonging, whereas in Jacksonville, we were the odd people out. The conversation there is much more post-reconstruction, post-Jim Crow—the town is called Jacksonville after Andrew Jackson, with schools named after Nathan Bedford Forrest and Robert E. Lee—and it was a very black-white conversation. And then there was us. If white was a seat at the table and black was looking through the window, Latino was the

glass. Present but invisible. We were an “other” history that didn’t have a history there. There was always a sense of being a visitor and we were always reminded in our home that we weren’t really home. Whether it was because of our accents or because we spoke Spanish publicly, part of the story is that location where we landed and where we were born. We had to navigate that incongruous identity.

Something that appears in the text pieces of *Los Dichos*, or “the sayings,” is something my father used to say: *donde unico hemos sido libre es en el estrecho de la Florida*, or in English, “the only place we’ve ever been free is on the Florida straits” (Fig. 2). That part, of sharing histories of Caribbean identity, I think that’s a place where Didier and I found a lot of commonalities. We had elders that had a radical counterpoint to the culture that we were being shown in our immediate surroundings. Much of what I make work about is this idea of being here, or the process of coming here, but being and living here in the U.S. in this body. It’s like being a Mark Bradford collage—it’s violent—and put together in numerous ways. Adding these details and ripping away others.

**LM:** Mechella and I have tried to group a number of these commonalities that you and Didier share in thematic sections in *SWARM*. at PAFA. We see the imperative of *SWARM*. in relation to spiritual traditions and the revolutions in both Haiti and Cuba, migratory identity, affect in the journey of and in the aftermath of migration, as well as artistic materials and processes. They function in a multilayered manner, informing one another analogically. Multiplicity and hybridity are part of the immigrant experience, but how do the syncretic traditions of religion, such as Catholicism and Santería, play into your works? You seem to unmoor them from their colonial roots through the personal, while at the same time holding onto that history and projecting a new possibility for them.

**NAG:** I think everything that I do begins at the personal and then through the process, expands. I don’t want to make journal entries about my own life. But it does begin there. And to answer your question, yes, I was raised extremely Catholic. In fact, I thought of becoming a priest. The same priest that encouraged me to choose this path was the one who told me that I needed to fiercely question my faith if I wanted to become a priest. Then I met my first girlfriend and I



**Fig. 2**  
*Los Dichos*, 2018  
Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop  
Nine laser-etched tobacco leaves on tobacco-stained Japanese rice paper  
(each) 22 x 30 in.  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller workshop

realized, oh I'm not going to become a priest.

Because syncretic religions are what they are, I don't know where the pure or authentic Catholicism would reside, say for instance in my grandmother's Catholicism, which was profound, and yet, votive candles with paired identities between *Orishas* and Catholic saints were always burning. And she had this incessant prayer that she would get involved in and the materiality of that... I think that syncretic religions *become*—because people are trying to keep themselves safe from an oppressor who insists that they adopt a new religion—and two generations down the line, no one remembers that part. And everyone thinks that we've always been *this*. And *this* looks a little more earthbound or more monotheistic depending on which relatives you live with. I have cousins in Cuba who are decidedly into Santería and all of the accoutrements of that are present in their lives. Then I have a far larger proportion of my family who are aggressively Catholic. Each of their practices overlap one another's even so. The languages of these things become like a soup—and I take that into my practice. I do research in order to better understand, but I approach it with a critical mind. It's interesting that you used the word “unmoored” because I'm thinking of the rosary beads sculpture and in some ways I'm decidedly mooring them to their colonial roots (**Fig. 3, p. 30**). They look like a weighted ball on a chain, and combined with Didier's figures in *Rara* (**p. 8**), his heads and my canon balls echoed one another and were linked. It evokes that history of violence. And this work began as very personal. It honored the strong women in my life—you'll notice that there's no cross on it, because it doesn't need a man. Instead, it has a big Mother Bead. It affirms a personal history, yes, but it also interrogates a much broader social and political history of the relationship between religion and the ownership of bodies and ideas.

**MY:** You mentioned the materiality of prayer, so we want to ask more about the materiality of your works. You allow your works to be and react to their environments but you also invite a sense of precarity especially in your use of ephemeral materials such as tobacco leaves, rice, beans, and butterflies. There is syncretism

present in the materials and materiality of your work. Could you tell us more about your relationship to these materials?

**NAG:** I have little confidence in myself as an artist. Instead of letting that sense of myself derail me, it can open doors for me. Here, it really allows me *not* to treat my work as precious. When you come to art late, you arrive having lived a whole life of holding in your mind the crystallized stereotype of what it is to make art. I was raised by a father who taught in an auto body shop; and remember, he painted my mom's name on the side of the car. He was a car guy and he cared about them. But I was raised holding the tools and helping, which I didn't love at the time, but now I realize that it was all sculpture. My insecurities about being a sculptor yielded to using fragile and ephemeral materials. We live in a world made of materials and they're yelling at us all the time. Like this table we are sitting at comes from an old barn, so I have one degree of separation from the horses in that barn and from the butts of the people who rode them. Right? There's this connection there. If all materials have meaning, then I'm mistaken if I take for granted any possible material.

**LM:** With works such as *Cuando Papi Flew*, *Nube*, and *chrysalis* (**Fig. 4, p. 31**), could you talk about the process of installing them since, inevitably, there's novelty every time.

**NAG:** In a way they're site responsive. I've mentioned Mark Creegan, and we're very close. He talks about his work on a contingency basis. He'll play with materials in his space and take them to a gallery and he'll make something with them that he's never made before. But he's very familiar with the materials so that he can create like that. It's more like jazz, a type of improvisation, versus classical music that's more about mastery. I've always admired that approach, that looseness or from-the-hip-ness and non-control. When I did spoken word and then later performance, I was moving through audiences and engaging directly one-on-one and I would always break the “fourth wall.” I engaged that way because I want the insecurity



**Fig. 3**  
***oración (ave Maria)***, 2017  
Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop  
Rubber and steel  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

or unpredictability of liveness to come forth. This was embedded in me through performance. But this is also because living itself is insecure. I want there to be the possibility that someone's going to come over and fuck my shit up. That unknown is so powerful. It's common that artists want to seek control over the whole because their name is on it. I don't need to control the whole. That's the same way that I want to approach the work. This is aligned with my aesthetic of live performance, which leaves things open to chance and risk. Even if the work is objects in a museum, it's not supposed to be static—it's living.

**MY:** When we first visited your studio a few months ago, you described yourself, first and foremost, as a performance artist. With the exception of *Boca (Your Memories Are My Myths)*, the rest of the works in the exhibition are in print, sculpture, and installation. You just mentioned how you invite precarity and spontaneity when you're installing your work, which is itself a kind of performance, allowing the work to change and alter beyond the concept. Can you talk about your identity as a performance artist and how it infiltrates the other media that you work with?

**NAG:** I identify as a performance artist. What I meant in that moment was that if I looked at my whole body of work and I had to pick my desert island works, they'd probably be the performances. I'm more confident in the product when I do performance art. I take risks more. In art making you find yourself at this precipice leading to potential absurdity. An artist has to jump into that void, *l'appel du vide*. The inexpressible desire to jump off a cliff. The willingness to jump is important. I was speaking to a quality judgment at that time when I told you that, but the way you just said it back to me, makes me think about this idea of performing the self. I ask my classes if they know what this means: what does it mean to perform themselves? You both might know in a way as women. People of color know this too. That's not to say that others can't know this idea, but women and people of color definitely know this. But some people honestly don't know they perform themselves—they think they just *are* themselves—and that's a privilege. Because there's this way in which we're always performing ourselves. So then to your question, if I identify as a performance artist, it makes me want to embrace that in another way moving forward. There are no sculpture or prints in PAFA's show, they're all performances. That sounds right and aligned with my way of making. I'm getting a weird chill right now thinking about that. I wonder if feeling like an imposter means that every time I make



**Fig. 4**  
**chrysalis**, 2017  
Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop  
Calligraph and serigraph on muslin, beans and rice  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

art, it's a performance. Bringing it all into that language, rather than thinking of them as different from it, the works are all part of my performance practice! Ha!

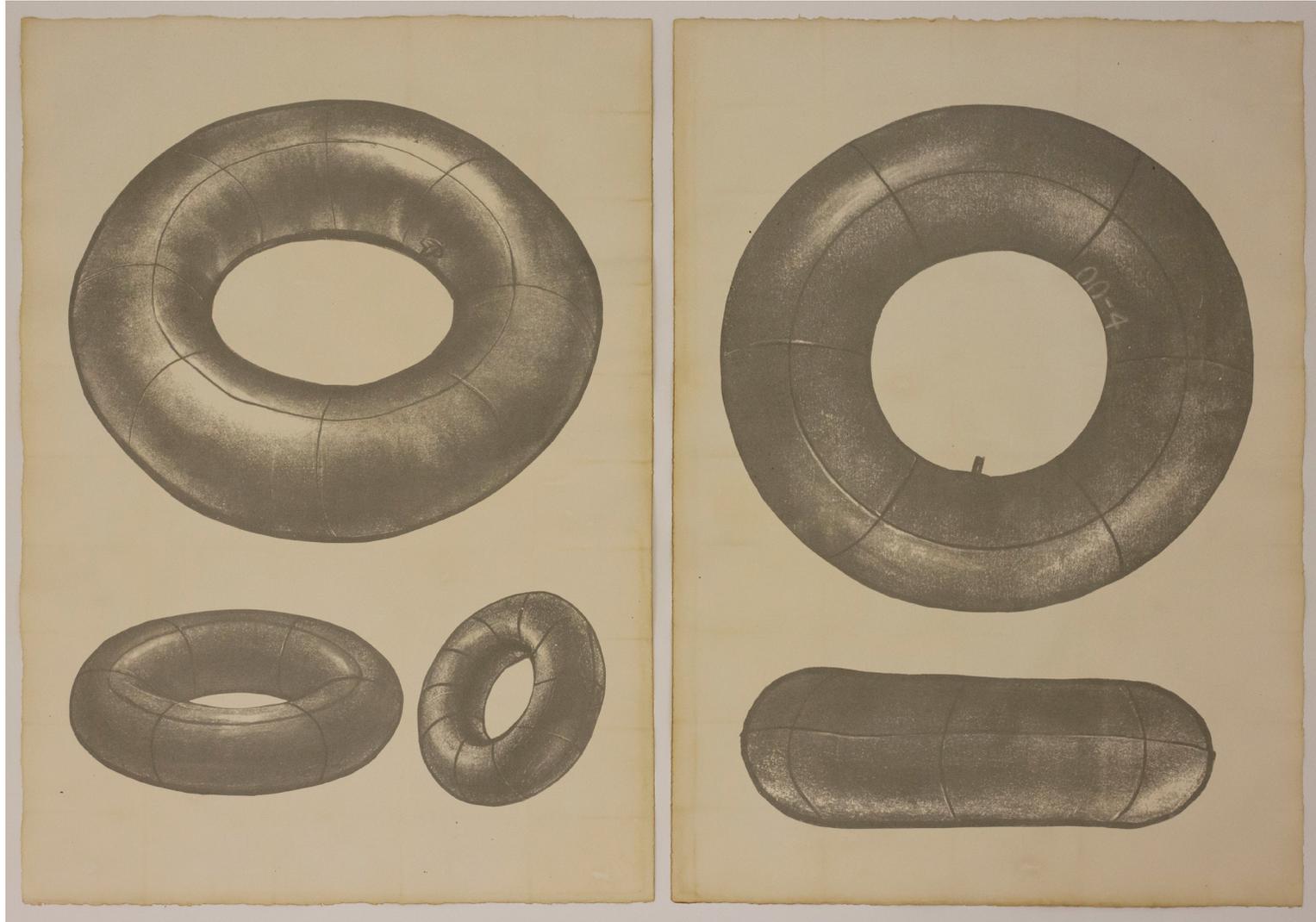
**LM:** We're getting very close to our installation at PAFA, the first art museum and school in the country. Do you see *SWARM*. as an intervention in a history of "American" art? How do you want this work to be received?

**NAG:** I actually didn't know that about PAFA being first, but I knew that about Philadelphia being the first capital. It was also the first place my dad lived in the United States, so it's where my founding father started out too. It's strange and attractive to think of this work in this aggressively so-called "American" place. I've been thinking about this show in Philadelphia in ways that surprised me because they echoed for me in certain ways how it felt when we knew that *SWARM*. was going to Miami. It felt so right. It was like a homecoming for the exhibition. This, as you said, "intervention," at PAFA feels right. It reminds me of Cildo Meireles, who created these works, which he called "insertions into ideological circuits." Histories of PAFA, or "the museum," that's an ideological circuit that we're going to contribute to upending, just as histories of the city itself is another one. We're here to challenge conventional thinking, in a manner much like the recent Nick Cave show at PAFA. Our show and that show are talking about the here and now. What does it mean to be an American? How does identity unfold? We're navigating that parenthetical, precarious space.





Plate 7  
*Two Dads*, 2017  
Didier William (b. 1983)  
Ink, carving, and collage on panel  
56 x 50 in.  
Private collection



**Plate 8**  
***New Vision of Travel by Sea***, 2017  
Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1983)/Taller Workshop  
Serigraph on tobacco-stained BFK paper,  
Edition of 5  
60 x 44 in.  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop



**Plate 9**  
***comfort (edredón)***, 2017  
Nestor Armando Gil (b.1971)/Taller Workshop  
Inner tube rubber  
108 x 108 in.  
Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop



**Plate 10**  
***M'ap Manje kochon Sa a***, 2017  
Didier William (b. 1983)  
Cut paper collage  
28 x 44 in.  
Courtesy of Union College Permanent  
Collection, Schenectady, NY

# EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Boca (Your Memories Are My Myths)*, 2018, Sugar, sand, coffee, tobacco, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Nube (Imaginary Lands)*, 2010/2018, Spark plugs and fishing hooks, dimensions variable. Private collection

Didier William (b. 1983), *I remember when I was a little girl*, 2013, Acrylic, wood stain, and oil on panel, 42 x 66 in. Courtesy of the artist

Didier William (b. 1983), *Ezili toujours konnen*, 2015, Ink and collage on panel, 48 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist

Didier William (b. 1983), *His Life Depends on Spotted Lies*, 2015, Wood stain and pastel on panel, 20 x 16 in. Courtesy of the artist

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *ala hala (Oshun)*, 2017, Serigraph on tobacco-stained BFK paper, Edition of 5, 60 x 44 in. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Enjambre*, 2017, Offset print, Stack of 1,000, (each) 24 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Didier William (b. 1983), *Azil Politik*, 2017, Collage cut paper, 26 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist

Didier William (b. 1983), *Bois Caïman*, 2017, Collage, acrylic, and wood carving on panel, 48 x 60 in. Collection of Robert and Frances Coulborn Kohler

Nestor Armando Gil (b.1971)/Taller Workshop, *comfort (edredón)*, 2017, Inner tube rubber, 108 x 108 in. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *chrysalis*, 2017, Callograph and serigraph on muslin, beans and rice, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Didier William (b. 1983), *Godforsaken Asylum/Azil Politik*, 2017, Ink and wood carving on panel, 26 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist

Didier William (b. 1983), *Kochon sa a lou*, 2017, Collage and screenprint on panel, 60 x 48 in. Courtesy of Union College Permanent Collection, Schenectady, NY

Didier William (b. 1983), *Kochon sa yo kon Danse/ These pigs know how to Dance*, 2017, Ink, carving, and collage on panel, 60 x 48 in. Courtesy of the Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, MO

Didier William (b. 1983), *M'ap Manje kochon Sa a*, 2017, Cut paper collage, 28 x 44 in. Courtesy of Union College Permanent Collection, Schenectady, NY

Didier William (b. 1983), *Ma tante Toya*, 2017, Collage, wood carving and ink on panel, 64 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist

Didier William (b. 1983), *Marassa Jumeaux*, 2017, Wood carving, ink, and collage on panel, 60 x 48 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Museum Purchase, 2018.3

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Mami said (dismorphia cubbana 1960 chevy)*, 2017, BFK paper and tobacco leaves, (each) 22 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil, (b. 1983)/Taller Workshop, *New Vision of Travel by Sea*, 2017, Serigraph on tobacco-stained BFK paper, Edition of 5, 60 x 44 in. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *oración (ave Maria)*, 2017, Rubber and steel, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist/ Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *oración (la Virgen y los balseros)*, 2017, 59 votive candles with screenprint, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *papalote (tailwinds)*, 2017, Paper and wood, 24 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Didier William (b. 1983), *Quiet Time*, 2017, Ink and wood carving on panel, 18 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist

Didier William (b. 1983), *Rara*, 2017, Collage and wood carving on panel, 48 x 90 in. Private collection

Didier William (b. 1983), *Ti Fre/Little Brother*, 2017, Collage, ink and wood carving on panel, 24 x 18 in. Private Collection, New York, NY

Didier William (b. 1983), *Two Dads*, 2017, Ink, carving, and collage on panel, 56 x 50 in. Private collection

Didier William (b. 1983), *We Will Win*, 2017, Ink and wood carving on panel, 24 x 18 in. Private Collection

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Abide (La Habana/ Pinar del Río)*, 2018, Video, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Cuando Papi Flew and Took El Cielo and El Mar with Him*, 2018, *Papilio demoleus* butterflies, inner tube rubber, and spark plugs, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Los Dichos*, 2018. Nine laser-etched tobacco leaves on tobacco-stained Japanese rice paper, (each) 22 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist and Taller Workshop

Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971)/Taller Workshop, *Princesa Demoleus*, 2018, *Papilio demoleus* butterflies and inner tube rubber, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist/Taller Workshop

**Photography Credits:**

All works by the artists ©Didier William ©Nestor Armando Gil/Taller Workshop

Didier William Archive: Plates 1, 3, 7, 10; William Figs. 1, 2, 4; Nestor Armando Gil Archive: Plate 8; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia/Barbara Katus: p. 2, 7, 8; Plates 2, 4, 5, 6, 9; William Fig. 3; Gil Figs. 2, 3, 4; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia/Marc Erlick: p. 20, 33; Gil Fig. 1

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition *SWARM.*, organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 28 June 2018–9 September 2018.

At the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *SWARM.* is made possible by Robert and Frances Coulborn Kohler and the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, with additional support from Reginald Browne, Emily and Mike Cavanagh, Suzanne and Norman Cohn, Ruth Fine, John and Susan Horseman, Dr. and Mrs. J. Brien Murphy, and Mr. & Mrs. Hal Sorgenti.

Contemporary Exhibitions in 2018-19 are supported by Laura and Richard Vague.

Special Exhibitions in 2018-19 are supported by Jonathan L. Cohen.

In the Morris Gallery, *SWARM.* is supported by

**SEI** New ways.  
New answers.®

and an anonymous donor.

Copyright © 2018 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Pennsylvania  
Academy  
of the Fine Arts **PAFA**

Edited by Judith M. Thomas, Vivian R. McLaughlin

Designed by William Roy Hodgson



**PAFA**

Pennsylvania Academy  
*of the* Fine Arts