

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## The Vancouver Art Gallery Opens the First Exhibition in Canada Dedicated to Firelei Báez

*This major survey will take over the second floor and exterior of the Gallery, showcasing two decades of otherworldly painting, sculpture and installation*



October 29, 2024, VANCOUVER, BC // Traditional Coast Salish Lands including the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

The Vancouver Art Gallery is proud to present the first North American solo exhibition dedicated to the work of **Firelei Báez**, one of the most exciting painters of her generation. Spanning nearly two decades of her career, Báez's rich and potent body of work delves into the complicated and often incomplete historical narratives that surround the Atlantic Basin and reexamines these histories for the present day. Over the past twenty years, Báez has made work that explores the legacies of colonial rule in the Americas and the Caribbean, drawing from sci-fi, fantasy, anthropology, folklore and mythology to propose new narratives. The exhibition features over two dozen paintings (some over 20 feet in length), drawings and sculptural installations, all of which are expansively vibrant and original, creating a sense of otherworldliness. Organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and featuring the largest number of Báez's paintings gathered in one place to date,

this spectacular survey offers Canadian audiences the rare opportunity to revel in Báez's powerful stories and sumptuous details.

"We are honoured to host the only presentation of Firelei Báez's work on North America's West Coast," says **Anthony Kiendl, CEO & Executive Director of the Vancouver Art Gallery**. "Currently located in a historical courthouse steeped in colonial history, the Vancouver Art Gallery is an apt site for showcasing Báez's art, weaving another narrative into her rich tapestry of history, folklore and fantasy."

Historical knowledge is met with colour and imagination in this exhibition, which results in powerful, richly coloured paintings and immersive sculptural installations that offer visitors the sensation of stepping into Báez's world. This ambitious survey will take over an entire floor at the Vancouver Art Gallery, including two works installed in the rotunda, where they engage with the building's colonial architecture and history. The exterior of the building will showcase a banner designed by the artist specifically for the Gallery's facade, poignantly covering its imposing neo-classical architecture with a mythical female protagonist and engaging the city's location at the edge of the ocean. *Truth was the bridge (or an emancipatory healing)* (2024) depicts a ciguapa—a mythological figure that is a recurring motif in Báez's work—crouching over a map on the left panel, while a tidal wave on the right crashes towards the centre. Báez often paints overtop maps, charts or construction plans for colonial architecture to challenge our understanding of power, history and truth. In *Truth was the bridge (or an emancipatory healing)*, she combines this practice with her common reimagining of Afrodiasporic figures, ciguapas of Dominican folklore and other mythological creatures. The ciguapa is a woman-plant-animal hybrid who is known to be a trickster, reclaimed as a powerful femme figure by the artist. This monumental mural is a reminder that colonial histories can be reimagined for future generations.

*Firelei Báez* is the first major exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery curated by **Eva Respini**, who joined the Gallery in 2023 as Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs. "Since I first saw Firelei's work over a decade ago, I have been impressed by the rigour of the work, and its expansive creativity and ambition. From the very beginning, she has made work that explores how we understand the Americas and its colonial histories. In this moment, her insistence on revising the dominant narratives to include multiple perspectives, imaginary realms and layers of complexity, is not only refreshing, but necessary. Her sweeping, large scale paintings are history paintings for our era," says **Eva Respini, Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs**.

Báez's powerful paintings feature complex and layered use of pattern, decoration and saturated colour, and their impressive scale physically immerses viewers into her worlds. Her investment in painting's capacity for storytelling and mythmaking informs all her work, including her sculptural installations, which bring this narrative quality into three dimensions. *A Drexycen chronocommons (To win the war you fought it sideways)* (2019) is an otherworldly installation that invites audiences to reassess the past, present and possible futures. A grotto-like space is cocooned in perforated blue tarp—a material often used for shelter following natural disasters, particularly in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where the artist's family is from. The tarps are reimagined as the night sky, or perhaps an underwater world, casting spots of light onto material patterned with Black diasporic symbols of nurturing and resistance.

A notable work is Báez's wall-size installation *Man Without a Country (aka anthropophagist wading in the Artibonite River)* (2014–15), in which Báez uses 225 pages sourced from late 19th century texts on the history of Hispaniola—the Caribbean Island that is divided between the Dominican Republic and Haiti—as supports for drawings depicting chimeric organisms, femme figurations and decorative embellishments. The markings intervene across the text, fusing folkloric motifs with academic writing to offer new ways of reading history and

culture. Báez installs each page individually to form this intricate installation, suggestive of island geographies and bodies of water, which viewers navigate according to their personal paths and perspectives.

This exhibition is organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and will be on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery from November 3, 2024, to March 16, 2025. The exhibition will then move to the Des Moines Art Center (June 14, 2025 to September 21, 2025). *Firelei Báez* is curated by **Eva Respini**, Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs, Vancouver Art Gallery (former Barbara Lee Chief Curator, ICA/Boston), with **Tessa Bachi Haas**, Assistant Curator, ICA/Boston.

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, available for purchase in the Gallery Store. This beautiful hardcover publication features works from throughout Báez's career, sketchbook extracts and essays by **Leticia Alvarado**, **Katherine Brinson**, **Jessica Bell Brown**, **Julie Crooks**, **Daniella Rose King**, **Eva Respini**, **Hallie Ringle** and **Katy Siegel**.

For more information, please visit: <https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/exhibitions/firelei-baez>

## FEATURED PROGRAM

### ART PARTY | VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

Saturday, November 2 | 8 PM – 12 AM

An incredible evening of art, music and performance, and an opportunity to preview *Firelei Báez* before its public opening. Highlights include a DJ set by Nina Mendoza; a dance battle curated by OURO Collective; *Postcards from Here and for Now*, an interactive art installation designed by artist Sahil Mroke and a specially curated Diwali dance party in the Gallery's rooftop pavilion organized by 5X Festival.

### ARTIST TALK | UBC ROBSON SQUARE

Sunday, November 3 | 3 PM – 4 PM

To coincide with the opening of the exhibition, join artist **Firelei Báez** in conversation with curator **Eva Respini**, Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs. They will discuss Báez's artistic practice and how storytelling and mythmaking inform her work.



Major support is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, Karen and Brian Conway, David and Jocelyne DeNunzio, Mathieu O. Gaulin, The Kotzubei-Beckmann Family Philanthropic Fund, Lise and Jeffrey Wilks, and an anonymous donor.



The Vancouver presentation is generously supported by:  
The Jane Irwin and Ross Hill Contemporary Arts Fund  
Patricia Charles

Government partner:



Media Partners:



**VANCOUVER ART GALLERY**

Media Kit: Firelei Baez ([The Vancouver Art Gallery](#))

[media@vanartgallery.bc.ca](mailto:media@vanartgallery.bc.ca)

Image: Rendering of: Firelei Báez, *Truth was the bridge (or an emancipatory healing)*, 2024, digital prints on vinyl mesh, Courtesy of the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York

## **ABOUT THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY**

Founded in 1931, the Vancouver Art Gallery is recognized as one of North America's most innovative visual arts institutions. The Gallery's ground-breaking exhibitions, extensive public programs and emphasis on advancing scholarship all focus on historical and contemporary art from British Columbia and around the world. Special attention is given to the accomplishments of Indigenous artists, as well as to those of the Asia Pacific region. The Gallery's exhibitions also explore the impact of images in the larger sphere of visual culture, design and architecture. The Vancouver Art Gallery is a charitable not-for-profit organization supported by its members, individual donors, corporate funders, foundations, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

*The Vancouver Art Gallery is situated on the ancestral and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, and is respectful of the Indigenous stewards of the land it occupies, whose rich cultures are fundamental to artistic life in Vancouver and the work of the Gallery.*

[vanartgallery.bc.ca](http://vanartgallery.bc.ca)

