



# FIRELEI BÁEZ

**TEACHER STUDY GUIDE**  
FALL/WINTER 2024-25

**Vancouver**  
Artgallery



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Installation view of Firelei Báez, *A Drexcyen chronocommons (To win the war you fought it sideways)*, 2019, at James Cohan, New York, 2019, The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection, Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York, Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle. © Firelei Báez

# VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

## TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art / Boston (ICA), *Firelei Báez* offers visitors the opportunity to delve deeply into the richly layered works and imaginative worlds of Dominican American contemporary artist Firelei Báez. Paintings, works on paper and installations filled with vibrant colours, patterns and textures—often overlaid on maps made during colonial rule in the Americas—explore the legacies of colonialism and the African diaspora in the Caribbean and beyond. Báez draws inspiration from anthropology, geography, folklore, fantasy, science fiction and social history to challenge traditional ideas about race, gender and nationality. Storytelling and mythmaking inform her work, regardless of its scale, date or content, which regularly focuses on women of colour. For Báez, the layered histories and symbols in her works are in conversation with the past while holding a limitless hope for creating a better future. “Every choice we make is predicated by the people we love in the past and the people we hope to love in the future,” says the artist. “It’s always within your grasp to make something new.” *Firelei Báez* provides a valuable opportunity for visitors to gain a comprehensive understanding of the artist’s complex and moving body of work, which establishes Báez as one of the most influential artists of the early twenty-first century.

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### DEAR TEACHER,

This teaching guide will assist you in preparing your class tour of the exhibition *Firelei Báez*. It provides activities to facilitate discussion before and after your school tour. Engaging in the suggested activities will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require very few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Glossary section.

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*Firelei Báez* takes place on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

# ***FIRELEI BÁEZ***

## **HAS 3 MAIN GOALS:**

1

### **TO INTRODUCE**

STUDENTS TO THE EVOLUTION OF FIRELEI BÁEZ'S WORK

2

### **TO CONSIDER**

KEY THEMES WITHIN THE EXHIBITION SUCH AS COLONIALISM, GENDER, RACE AND NATIONALISM

3

### **TO EXPLORE**

INDIVIDUAL ARTWORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS, TECHNIQUES AND BÁEZ'S PROCESS





**“My works are propositions, meant to create alternate pasts and potential futures, questioning history and culture in order to provide a space for reassessing the present.” —Firelei Báez**

# GLOSSARY

**ABSTRACTION** Art that does not attempt to accurately represent a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect.

**COLONIAL(ISM)/COLONIZATION** A process that occurs when settlers arrive at a place in order to establish political control over it. "This is done by creating new governing systems and ways of living, being and doing that make the ways of those who were there before, inferior. This creates unequal relationships between the colonizer and the Indigenous people."<sup>1</sup>

**CONTEMPORARY ART** Artwork that has been created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists. Many contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today's world and challenge traditional boundaries. Contemporary art defies easy categorization in its rejection of historical definitions of what constitutes art.

**DIASPORA** A large group of people who share a cultural and regional origin but are living away from their traditional homeland.

**DIPTYCH** Two canvases side by side and are part of the same artwork.

**FOLKLORE** Made of two words: 1) *folk*, which means regional people, and 2) *lore*, which means stories. Therefore, folklore refers to stories told by people in a particular region and passed down orally through generations until they became part of a culture's tradition.

**INSTALLATION ART** A term used to describe large-scale, mixed-media constructions, often designed for a specific place or for a temporary period of time.

**MYTHOLOGY** The rich collections of traditional tales called myths from cultures all over the world. A myth is a story that describes the adventures of beings with more-than-human powers, often used to explain natural phenomena.

**MYTHICAL** Existing only in the imagination.

**TROMPE L'OEIL** Translates to "deceives the eye" or "fools the eye." It is used to describe a visual illusion in art whereby a two-dimensional surface appears to be a three-dimensional object.

**UNCEDDED** A term for a relationship between the government of Canada and Indigenous people when no treaties have been established. In general, "unceded" means the lands and waters of the Indigenous people were never surrendered and were taken without permission.

<sup>1</sup> Monica Gray Smith, *Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation* (Victoria BC: Orca, 2017), 144





Firelei Báez, *Can I Pass? Introducing the Paper Bag to the Fan Test for the Month of July, 2011* (detail), gouache, ink and graphite on panel, Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York, Photo: Mats Nordman, © Firelei Báez



# PRE- AND POST-TOUR ACTIVITIES ALL AGES



## 1. GRADES 4-12 WHO IS FIRELEI BÁEZ? Pre-Tour Activity



## 2. ALL AGES MEMORY PAINTING Pre-Tour Activity

Firelei Báez in her studio, Photo: Sunny Leerasanthanah

Firelei Báez, *Untitled (Les tables de géographie réduites en un jeu de cartes)*, 2022 (detail), oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas, Collection of Deborah Beckmann and Jacob Kotzubei, Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York, Photo: Jackie Furtado, © Firelei Báez





### 3. ALL AGES WHAT'S THE STORY? Post-Tour Activity



### 4. ALL AGES MAIL ART Post-Tour Activity

Firelei Báez, *Adjusting the Moon (The right to non-imperative clarities): Waxing*, 2019–20, oil and acrylic on panel, Private Collection, Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York, Photo: Christopher Burke Studios, © Firelei Báez

Firelei Báez, *A Drexycen chronocommons (To win the war you fought it sideways)*, 2019 (detail), two paintings, hand-painted wooden frame, perforated tarp, printed mesh, handmade paper over found objects, plants, books, Oman incense and palo santo, The Joyner/ Giuffrida Collection, Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York, Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle, © Firelei Báez

# GRADES 4-12 | WHO IS FIRELEI BÁEZ?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

**"A lot of times, when we think of history, we're taught to imagine it as something distant and separate from ourselves. And I want us to realize we're constant threads that are speaking forward and backward. Our actions are predicated by people before us, and our lessons learned can maybe dictate how [and] what we pass on."  
—Firelei Báez**



### OBJECTIVE

Students are introduced to the life, artistic processes and works of contemporary artist Firelei Báez.

### MATERIALS

- Writing materials
- Access to the internet
- Artist Information Sheet (p. 12) and the Student Worksheet (p. 13)

### PROCESS

- Divide the class into small groups.
- Assign each group one of the categories from the Artist Information Sheet (p. 12).
- Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 13) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section.
- Have them conduct research using the internet, either at home or at school.
- Ask each group to find and describe a piece of work by the artist and add it into the space provided on the worksheet.
- Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

### CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- What were some of the most interesting things students learned or discovered?
- Which piece are students curious about seeing in the exhibition?
- Does the artist's work connect to or resonate with the students' lives? Why or why not?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Firelei Báez in her studio, Photo: Sunny Leerasanthanah



# GRADES 4-12 | WHO IS FIRELEI BÁEZ?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D | ABOUT THE ARTIST

Firelei Báez was born in Santiago de los Caballeros in the Dominican Republic and lives and works in New York City. She makes intricate works on paper and canvas as well as large-scale, immersive installations and sculptures. Báez creates work that draws upon the rich folklore and colonial history of the Caribbean to explore new possibilities for the future.

Báez was born in 1981 to a Dominican mother and a father of Haitian descent. Growing up in Dajabón, a Dominican Republic market city bordering Haiti, she was raised between two countries with long histories of social, economic and ethnic tension. This experience informed her understanding of politics, place and heritage and has been a leading theme in her art today. Her family moved to the United States when she was eight years old and continued to move once they arrived. Art let Báez personalize each new bedroom to make it feel like home: "Creativity was a place that felt safe. Everywhere we moved, I would create a space I wanted to be in. I would make these little fantasy rooms out of whatever little room I was given, really changing the spaces and environment I was in, making paintings to go in them." For Báez, art became a form of survival, beauty that brought comfort, and something that could transform worlds. It later inspired Báez to move to New York in 2001 to study art. She earned a bachelor's degree from Cooper Union, a master's from Hunter College in 2010, and completed a residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

Since moving to the United States, Báez has heard people claim that Caribbean people lack rich historical records of ancestry and place. She challenges these ideas in her art because she cares deeply about Caribbean history, politics and culture, and her own heritage. Báez has always been fascinated by Dominican folklore's Ciguapa (pronounced see-GWAH-pah), a feminine trickster with backward feet and long and lustrous hair. As Báez explains, "She's traceless. She's beautiful. She gets to be fierce. She gets to break generations of family troubles." The Ciguapa is a recurring theme in her work as a superhero full of potential who represents the highly independent, self-possessed, deeply feeling woman Báez hopes to see in the world, instead of the warning of what not to be that she

was given as a child. Báez frequently draws upon folklore, anthropology, geography, fantasy, science fiction and social history, along with Western European historical art, to revisit and re-present Afro-Caribbean [or, African and Caribbean] diasporic histories, treating them as in a state of continuous change to explore new possibilities for the future.

Báez creates narrative paintings that always engage the senses first to grab the viewer with beauty and imagery. She uses bright colours, layered patterns, abstract gestures and symbols rooted in Afro-Caribbean cultures. Her works feature mysterious figures that hover between human, animal and mythical beings. Knowing that humans have a multitude of choices in life, part of Báez's process involves never presenting a singular message in her work. The point of the work is to express that the viewer has many pathways to explore, and people can choose their own journey within it: "There are certain histories within the work that might feel opaque or unknown to certain audiences and I want everybody to come in, I want everyone to be able to find an anchor point to start navigating and find connection." In 2012, Báez began to make her ink and acrylic paintings on Yupo paper because of its non-absorbent properties. In 2017, she began to create large-scale works in which she directly painted on archival materials. She often paints directly onto reprinted archival maps,, manuals and travelogues from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries to question the viewer's understanding of power and suggest alternative histories. Her practice has a decidedly activist component, challenging dominant narratives on the Caribbean's culture and its people and reframing them in a powerful way. Today, Báez is exploring the use of bronze to create imaginative sculptures.

Báez is one of the most influential artists of her generation. She reimagines inherited stories and identities, superimposing fresh new images filled with meaning on top of often flawed historical documents and maps. Through her art, Báez exposes that history is not fixed and that we have the ability to look backwards, question and learn to dictate what we pass on in order to create a better world.

# GRADES 4-12 | WHO IS FIRELEI BÁEZ?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D | ABOUT THE ARTIST

### ARTIST INFORMATION SHEET

#### PERSONAL INFORMATION

- She was born in 1981 in Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic
- Having grown up amidst social, economic and ethnic tensions inspires her art today
- She moved a lot, and art allowed her to make each new space her own
- She creates paintings, drawings, sculptures and immersive installations exploring legacies of colonialism and the African diaspora

#### INFLUENCES

- Caribbean history, politics, culture and her identity
- Mythology plays an important role in her work
- Her work reframes African diasporic histories
- History is a state of flux that can be corrected for the better

#### ART PROCESS

- She uses bright colours, layered patterns, abstract gestures and symbols rooted in Afro-Caribbean cultures
- Her works depict mysterious figures hovering between human, animal and mythical beings
- She creates work with more than one message or pathway for understanding
- She often paints directly on archival materials to suggest alternative histories



# GRADES 4-12 | WHO IS FIRELEI BÁEZ?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

STUDENT WORKSHEET (FILL IN THE CHART WITH THE FOLLOWING)

PERSONAL INFORMATION	INFLUENCES	ART PROCESS	AN ARTWORK

# ALL AGES | MEMORY PAINTING

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



**"The studio is a repository where the energy that I have experienced in the world has to be expressed or I'll just burst." —Firelei Báez**

### OBJECTIVE

Create a layered watercolour exploring memory using wet-on-wet and drybrush techniques inspired by the work of Firelei Báez.

### DISCUSSION

Art has the ability to evoke strong memories of the past, feelings of the present and hopes for the future. Firelei Báez uses painting to explore the concept of memory and its relationship to time. In her art, she shows that experiences and memories remain significant, even as time goes on. Her techniques involve mark-making, where she expresses herself by using vibrant, layered colours and shapes that connect to Afro-diasporic cultural re-memory, allowing personal experiences and histories to converse with established Western narratives.

One interesting aspect of Báez's process is that she often works with her canvas on the floor, onto which she pours and splatters paint. This technique allows gravity to influence the blending of colours, creating dynamic, mottled effects. She likens herself to a filter through which an immense energy passes and flows into her artwork, where each piece becomes a vibrant testament to personal and cultural stories.

As you think about Báez's work, consider how her approach challenges traditional narratives and what it means to remember and represent one's heritage through art.

### MATERIALS

- Watercolour paper
- Washable markers
- Watercolours
- Paintbrush, container of water, paper towel
- White oil pastel
- Pencil crayon or pencil

Firelei Báez, *Untitled (Les tables de géographie réduites en un jeu de cartes)*, 2022, oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas, Collection of Deborah Beckmann and Jacob Kotzubei, Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York, Photo: Jackie Furtado, © Firelei Báez

# ALL AGES | MEMORY PAINTING

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

### PROCESS

- Look closely at Firelei Báez's painting *Untitled (Les tables de géographie réduites en un jeu de cartes)* (2022). How does Firelei Báez use abstraction, colour, shapes and positive/negative space in this painting? What feelings or memories does this painting evoke? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Choose a memory that you would like to represent in your art making. What is your favourite place, food or hobby? Who do you like to spend time with? Do these things remind you of a memory you want to represent in your art?
- Choose a marker colour that represents how you feel about your memory. Draw a shape or symbol representing your memory onto your watercolour paper. Draw it large, trying to touch at least two sides of your paper. Don't worry if it doesn't look the way you wanted, as most of this will disappear as you continue.
- Turn your paper so that it is sideways and repeat your shape or symbol, drawing large and trying to touch at least two sides of the paper. Repeat this step one more time so that you have three intersecting shapes on your paper.
- Notice how the overlapping lines have created new shapes on your paper. Dip your paintbrush in water and paint around the outside of the large shape created by your three overlapped drawings. Choose three interesting shapes created by the intersecting lines and paint with just water. Notice the changes happening in your marker drawing.
- Using your watercolours, choose a primary colour to represent your memory and wash it across the wet areas on your paper. This is called wet-on-wet technique.
- Choose another primary watercolour and add dots or dashes of colour on top of the wet areas. Pay attention to how the colours meld together and, like Báez, allow them to blend and mottle on their own.
- Begin to fill in all the intersecting shapes with the same two watercolours, but this time, don't wet the paper first. Try to make sure the same colours don't touch each other in the shapes. What colour is being revealed as the two primaries meld together? Add this colour to some of your shapes.

- Using your white oil pastel, pick three to five areas of your painting where you want to block out the colour, adding back some negative space.
- Dry your paintbrush and add dashes in the third primary colour you haven't used. This is called a dry-brush technique.
- Add watercolours to increase the intensity of areas of your painting until you are satisfied.
- Using a pencil or coloured pencil, add patterns that represent your memory, using lines or shapes, in small areas of your work.
- Display your artwork in the classroom.

### CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- What was it like to explore mark-making, colour and shape like Firelei Báez to evoke memories?
- How does your final painting connect to the memory you chose to represent?
- What was planned and what did you change along the way?
- What are some of the things that you discovered? If you were to do the project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?



Student example



# ALL AGES | WHAT'S THE STORY?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



### OBJECTIVE

Write and illustrate a new story with contemporary characters and settings inspired by folklore.

### DISCUSSION

Folklore is of particular interest to Firelei Báez. Some of her work ties together subject matter inspired by the myths and folklore she heard as a child in the Dominican Republic. Firelei Báez's *Adjusting the Moon (The right to non-imperative clarities): Waxing* (2019–20) is part of a diptych. In these works, Báez references shape-shifting Ciguapa figures who have burst through their bodily boundaries.

The Ciguapa is a mythological creature from the folklore of the Dominican Republic, where Firelei Báez was born. It is portrayed (and remembered by those who saw it) as a woman of dazzling beauty with long hair. She is said to have brown or dark blue skin, backward-facing feet and a mane of very long, glossy hair that covers her body. She lives in the forest of the high mountains and, due to the position of her feet, a person can never quite tell which direction the Ciguapa is moving by looking at her footprints. Báez, who has lived in the United States since childhood, uses the Ciguapa's image to trigger memories of the country she left and as a way to connect with her ancestors.

In this diptych, the Ciguapas are set within arch-shaped colonial architectural elements that fail to hold them, seemingly breaking the trompe l'oeil frame of the past and future. The Ciguapas are hidden and dissolve into fragmented and textured fireworks of colour and, by doing so, present fictional, alternative universes.

### MATERIALS

- Pencil
- Writing paper
- Drawing paper
- Pencil crayons, crayons or markers

### PROCESS

- Begin by looking at *Adjusting The Moon (The Right to Non-Imperative Clarities): Waxing* and answer the following questions:

1. What are three words you would use to describe this work?
2. What catches your attention?
3. How has the artist used line, colour and texture to create a narrative? What do you think the narrative in this work is about?

# ALL AGES | WHAT'S THE STORY?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY CONT'D

- As a class, discuss folklores familiar to you. What similarities do you notice? What differences?
- Drawing on inspiration from the stories you shared, begin to think about, and discuss as a class, ways to create a new narrative with contemporary characters and settings to highlight an idea or issue that is important to you.
- Before you begin to write, brainstorm ideas around characters, plot and setting by thinking about and answering the following questions:
  1. Who are your characters and why did you pick them?
  2. What might be interesting about putting these folklore characters into a contemporary setting?
  3. What would you like your characters to do and why? Would they need to adapt in any way?
  4. What do you think this character might have to offer the contemporary world?
  5. Where will your story be set? Why is it a good setting for your characters?
- Write your story featuring the characters and setting that you have brainstormed.
- Create a drawing of a single image that represents your story.
- Share your story and image with the class.

## CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- Firelei Báez draws upon her cultural history using Dominican folklore, such as the Ciguapa, in her artwork to explore contemporary issues that are important to her. After creating your own story using folklore, do you feel you have successfully created a way to share ideas and issues that are important to you with others? Why or why not?
- What were some of the things you took into consideration when creating your story?
- What was easy or hard about creating a story this way?
- If you were to do this project again, what would you keep the same and what would you do differently?



# ALL AGES | MAIL ART

## POST-TOUR ACTIVITY

**"Every choice we make is predicated by the people we love in the past and the people we hope to love in the future. It's always within your grasp to make something new." —Firelei Báez**



### OBJECTIVE

Create a postcard for the exhibition *Firelei Báez*.

### DISCUSSION

Having finished the school tour of *Firelei Báez*, you have insight into who Báez is as an artist and her motivations, and you have also learned about issues that are important to her.

As a class, discuss which artworks resonated with you and why. Discuss what you would share with a friend who has not seen the exhibition. Which artwork would you share? What interesting facts would you tell them about the artist? How would you describe Báez's artistic process to them? What ideas are important to Firelei Báez and why?

Firelei Báez, *A Drexycen chronocommons (To win the war you fought it sideways)*, 2019 (detail), two paintings, hand-painted wooden frame, perforated tarp, printed mesh, handmade paper over found objects, plants, books, Oman incense and palo santo, The Joyner/ Giuffrida Collection, Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth, New York, Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle, © Firelei Báez



# ALL AGES | MAIL ART

## POST-TOUR ACTIVITY

### MATERIALS

- 5x7" blank index card
- Drawing materials

### PROCESS

- Draw a line down the middle of a 5x7" index card.
- On the right side of the line, create a spot for an address and make a square where you would place a stamp. The left side of the line is where you will write your message to the person you want to send your postcard to.
- Flip your postcard over. Think about something that resonated with you from your Gallery visit. Draw it on your card. Maybe you will use some of Firelei Báez's techniques and processes to create a drawing of your experience or feelings after seeing her work. Maybe you will want to draw an artwork from the exhibition that you found interesting.
- When you're finished drawing, flip over your artwork again and write a note to someone you want to share your Gallery visit with.
- Address your postcard to the recipient and don't forget to add a stamp.

### CONCLUSION

Share your postcard with the class and discuss the following:

- How did Firelei Báez inspire your postcard image?
- What did you consider when making your postcard?
- What similarities and differences did you notice between the postcards created?
- Were you surprised at the different things that resonated with your classmates?
- Did other postcards make you think further about some of the artworks in the exhibition? Why or why not?

# FURTHER LEARNING

## TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES

### BOOK

*Firelei Báez*. Edited by Eva Respini. Boston and New York: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and DelMonico Books, 2024.

### WEBSITES

[Art Gallery of Ontario: Teacher Resource](#)

[How Rising Star Firelei Báez Uses Yoruba Myth and Her Afro-Caribbean Heritage in Her Profound 'Joy Out of Fire' Murals](#)

[Art Terms | Tate](#)

### VIDEO

[60 Seconds with Firelei Báez](#)

[Firelei Báez on Art as a Tool of Survival | The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston](#)

[How artist Firelei Báez transforms spaces to build connections](#)

[Firelei Báez: An Open Horizon \(or\) the Stillness of a Wound | Art21](#)

[Firelei Báez: I Consider Myself a Filter – Louisiana Channel](#)

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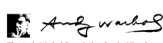
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*Firelei Báez* is organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and curated by Eva Respini, Deputy Director & Director of Curatorial Programs, Vancouver Art Gallery (former Barbara Lee Chief Curator, ICA/Boston), with Tessa Bachi Haas, Assistant Curator, ICA/Boston

Organized by:



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**

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