

OBSERVER

Puerto Rico's National Forest Is a Living Laboratory of Art and Ecology
By Elisa Carollo | January 15, 2026



Edra Soto, De Río a Río (From River to Laughter), 2025. Courtesy ArteYUNQUE | Photo: Adriana Vázquez Acevedo

Bringing art into a protected national rainforest—the largest in the U.S. Forest Service system—requires not only intense, multilateral curatorial thinking but also empathy that extends beyond the human to nature itself. It demands stepping outside the dominant anthropocentric paradigm that has historically shaped much of Western art and instead collaborating with nature to create symbiotically rather than in opposition. It is a practice of reattunement to natural rhythms and cycles—a form of listening as much as shaping. “It’s a continuous learning, from nature and from the artist,”

Georgie Vega, director and curator of ArteYUNQUE, told *Observer*. The founder of theartwalkpr, Vega, who has overseen the initiative since its launch, is a well-established figure in the Puerto Rican art community, with over 20 years of experience conceiving and promoting exhibitions across the island’s museums.

Now in its third edition, ArteYUNQUE brings art into deep dialogue with the half-kilometer Science and Conservation Trail at El Portal de El Yunque, the main visitor center of El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico.

This did not come without resistance or challenge. Ecologists overseeing the site were initially skeptical and deeply concerned about the potential environmental impact of introducing artworks into such a fragile ecosystem. The early stages were marked by caution, confrontation and bureaucratic delay. “We had to earn their trust,” Vega recalled. Even after installation began, new challenges emerged. Working in the forest means working with nature—accepting its rhythms, reactions and unpredictability rather than attempting to control them. For this reason, ArteYUNQUE structures its calendar around hurricane season: the annual outdoor commissions are installed in October and remain on view until July.

The first edition launched in 2023, gathering eight artists’ works under the title “NATURA” with very minimal resources, primarily raised through grassroots fundraising efforts on the island. “It was extremely experimental,” Vega said. By the second edition, the project had secured more stable support, including a three-year grant from the Mellon Foundation and backing from Bloomberg Philanthropies. All works are now accompanied by QR codes offering additional information and contextual materials via Bloomberg Connects.

Since then, ArteYUNQUE has not only helped restore life and energy to the forest but also drawn Puerto Ricans back to reconnect with this sacred landscape. El Yunque is not only home to a unique ecosystem but also carries profound spiritual and historical significance: for the Indigenous Taíno, it was a sacred site—the dwelling place of their principal deity—and petroglyphs depicting Taíno figures and symbols can still be found today. This spiritual reverence was also grounded in ecological reality: El Yunque is the hydrological heart of northeastern Puerto Rico, supplying freshwater to hundreds of thousands of residents. Major rivers—including Espíritu Santo, Mameyes, Sabana, Pitahaya, Fajardo, Santiago, Río Blanco and Río Grande de Loíza—all originate in or are fed by the forest.

Held under the title “RÍO,” the third iteration of the annual exhibition, on view through July 18, centers on El Yunque’s historical role as a vital watershed, expanding outward to consider rivers and bodies of water as sources of life, channels of connection and vessels of memory. The eight commissioned works engage this theme in diverse materials, gestures and forms of encounter, responding to water as both an ecological system and a cultural archive. Holding a similarly evocative presence, Edra Soto’s sculptural installation *De Río a Río (From River to River)* presents three suspended bodies composed of ceramic masks and silk ribbons. The work links river spirits and their relentless flow to experiences of migration, transformation and resilience within Puerto Rican history, weaving a poetic connection between water and movement across time and space. Drawing from her own migratory experience—living and working in Chicago—the masks reflect the processes of physical, emotional and cultural transformation, adopting different

personalities to adapt to new surroundings. At the same time, inspired by African and Caribbean traditions and symbologies, the sculpture assumes a new totemic role, serving as a protector and an expression of identity.

All artists participating in ArteYUNQUE are Puerto Rican, either based on the island or part of its diaspora. In this way, the program serves as a vital platform for the local art scene, offering one of the few opportunities for commissioned public artworks of this scale in Puerto Rico. Each artist receives a production budget and stipend while retaining ownership of their work. “This helps to empower and support the amazing art scene that we have. There are very few art commission programs on the island,” Vega said, underscoring how rare it is for artists to operate in such a prominent, site-specific public context.

At the same time, ArteYUNQUE is playing a key role in drawing local communities back to the forest. “The site is often perceived as being only for tourists, yet this project opens them up to the local community, giving people the chance to connect with and have real access to contemporary art.” Visitor numbers reflect this growing impact, and each edition is accompanied by a rich program of music, poetry and performances that has consistently exceeded expectations in terms of attendance. During the most recent edition, the site welcomed approximately 600,000 visitors. “It’s a significant number—especially considering that no museum in Puerto Rico reaches those figures,” Rivera Ayala noted, observing that tourists rarely come to the island for museums alone and that such levels of engagement—particularly among local audiences—are remarkable.

Perhaps most importantly, ArteYUNQUE operates as a living creative laboratory for ecological awareness, particularly for younger generations. Each edition demonstrates how human intervention can exist sustainably and respectfully within nature. “Our rule is leave no trace,” Vega said. Artists are required to leave no permanent mark and are encouraged to use materials with the lowest possible ecological impact.

Artists undertake multiple site visits before proposing a work, carefully selecting locations and studying how their interventions will unfold. “Once the artists submit their proposals, we move into a mitigation process with ecologists, anthropologists and historians to ensure that what we’re doing has little to no impact on the landscape. The site itself presents challenges, of course, but at the same time it pushes everyone—artists included—out of their comfort zones in a productive and meaningful way.”

In fact, creating art in and for nature also means accepting vulnerability, degradation and change over time—processes shaped by weather, plant growth and interactions with non-human elements. Most installations are therefore conceived as inherently ephemeral, synchronized with natural cycles and designed to evolve in tandem with the living environment that surrounds them.

Yet, as Vega notes, when it comes to conservation challenges, humans often pose the greatest threat. “When we have these first meetings, I always tell the artists to be conscious that they have nature and human nature,” she joked, acknowledging that fallen branches are part of the process. At the same time, damage caused by curious visitors remains an ongoing educational challenge. While the U.S. Forest Service does not provide direct funding, it supports ArteYUNQUE through maintenance, surveillance, site protection and coverage of potential litigation-related costs.

Looking ahead, a central concern is how to preserve—or extend—the life of what the project has generated, despite the ephemeral nature of the works. A publication devoted to the first editions is currently in the plans, but from the outset, documentation has been central to Vega’s vision. ArteYUNQUE’s media channels are filled with material tracing every phase of the commissions, from artists working in their studios to the processes of conception, production and installation in the forest.

A significant moment will come next year, when works from the inaugural edition will be recreated or represented in an exhibition at El Barrio in New York. “We wanted to do something for the diaspora and bring a broader awareness of this project,” Vega said.