



EFA Robert  
Blackburn  
Printmaking  
Workshop

## The Only Thing That Lasts:

### An Oral History of Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop interview with Nitza Tufiño

Nitza Tufiño, born in 1949 to Mexican and Puerto Rican parents, spent her childhood between Puerto Rico, New York City, and Mexico. When she moved to New York in 1969, she became involved in establishing El Museo del Barrio, where she created the original façade artwork. Around the same time, she worked as a consultant on Puerto Rican and Caribbean art for both the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, helping to elevate Latino artists into the mainstream art world.

Tufiño also co-founded El Taller Boricua, a Puerto Rican artist collective, and served as the master printmaker and director of the Rafael Tufiño Printmaking Workshop. As a board member of Friends of Puerto Rico, she opened the Cayman Gallery in SoHo, which later became the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (MOCHA).

In this passage, Tufiño reflects on how her upbringing in Puerto Rico, surrounded by artists and intellectuals, shaped her later involvement in art and activism.

**Interview conducted by Camille Crain Drummond  
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Nitza Tufiño:

Well, my father was studying to be an artist in Mexico City in San Carlos. And my mother was a model, she was a dancer. She modeled for Diego, and Cantú, and Ruíz, and Hoffmann, there's a lot of sculptures and paintings in Mexico. So, they got married and they had me in Mexico, and then they moved to Puerto Rico. And I was raised in Puerto Rico. So, I come from a family of artists that had always a lot of artists around—musicians, theater, all of that in Puerto Rico. And I have Indigenous blood from my mother, from Mexico, my great-grandmother was part of the revolution, granted as Zapatista, and on my father's side we're slaves. We're African, we came from Yoruba, Yoruba and Taíno Indians. So my great grandmother, she was born in 1855, and she died like in 1967. I was 18, she was like 112 when she passed away. So there was a lot of culture and religious—of the Yoruba, the Indigenous, you know. And so I come from that. I grew up in that in the Caribbean. And my father always said that he was a Black man. He always considered himself Black from the slave time and all of that. And through my father, we met, even when I was 10 years old,

because he worked at División de Educación de la Comunidad, which was they did all those posters, they did graphics and all of those different portfolios in Puerto Rico for the government of Puerto Rico. So there were a lot of social justice issues. And one person that came—two people—that were very, very important from the civil rights movement that came to Puerto Rico was Martin Luther King. He came to the Interamerican, invited by a lady called Eve Scott—she was a socialist—to give a talk about civil rights in Puerto Rico. And the other one that was very, very important that came to Puerto Rico, who was a very famous writer, was James Baldwin. So since I was a little kid, I was always involved in meeting all these people and listening to what they had to say. So I come from that background of pro-social justice and wanting to be an artist in that sense.

So when I became of age, I mean, I came to study to the junior high school. My parents send me to New York to school so I could be here eighth grade, ninth grade. And then I went back to the island so that I could learn English and learn other things. And then I went back to the island and then I decided to go to school in Mexico, where my mother took me, and I met Leopoldo Méndez from the Taller de Gráfica Popular in Mexico. And through my mother and through the years, he was a very good friend; because the Mexicans, a lot of the artists and people like my mom who were living in Mexico, were very helpful during the time where most of the Black artists like Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett—they were married together at that time and they had children—they were living in Mexico, and the Mexican artists and everybody embraced them and they became part of the family over there in Mexico. So I knew all those people from there. And then Charles White moved to California and all of that. And then I stayed in school in San Carlos, because I studied in San Carlos, with Leopoldo Méndez and all of that.

And then after that, I came to the States and then I got involved with the Young Lords and Taller Boricua through my father, because he was one of the mentors with Carlos Osorio in the social justice for the liberation of Puerto Rico, and the liberation of the people in terms of housing, medicine, and all of those things. But we had we were artistic, so that was the artistic angle on our side. And then we created El Museo del Barrio. Then, Bob was involved very much in creating the Studio Museum in Harlem. And through Bob, he became my mentor at the printmaking workshop on 17th Street, and through him, he always embraced young people and would also have his other friends who were artists to mentor. Like, he was very good friends with Romare Bearden, very good friend with Critchlow, Jacob Lawrence. So those people became our mentors and they would view our work and give us ideas and things like that. And that was very, very important because you didn't have in the States a place where to go for your work to be seen or for somebody to give you a lot or help you, you know what I mean—that you were going in the right direction. And since the shop was on 17th Street, sometimes—he lived in Chelsea—so we used to go, near Chelsea, there used to be a deli place, like a small restaurant, and we used to go and have breakfast and lunch with all of them, and we have to have discussions. So for a young person like me, even though I came from an artistic family, and I wasn't really plugged into the situation in the States or New York, that was very important in terms of my formation as an artist, in terms of the ideology, in terms of techniques and being free of, you know, wanting to do things that were expressive, you know, and have no fear, do whatever you want to do, and also connect with other people.

And then at the same time, sometimes we used to give classes. We used to give classes to young children, like at St. Paul—we took over St Paul's church—which is on Eighth Avenue by Fordham over there, and we used to take the presses. Bob would bring the presses and we would give the kids classes, and we made them talk about history and things that they wanted to do so they could express themselves, so that they could learn and they could use their creativity and thought and writing for self-expression, you know what I mean? So those things were very important. So I got involved also with Bob doing that. And then also at Taller, Bob will be used to come around. Then we did—when the first shows that they had on Fifth Avenue at Studio Museum in Harlem—it was right there on Fifth Avenue—all the Puerto Rican artists, the Black artists, they got involved. Also, the movement that we created, which was called the Nuyorican Movement, you know, with the poets, Pedro, Miguel Algarín, and all of that. And also, like Amiri Baraka and Amina were fantastic, you know, I mean, so this was like the Blacks also, you know, with the Puerto Rican and the Caribbean—we were all coming together as a family in this cultural new movement that we were trying to create.