

Edra Soto  
The Myth of Closure



# The Myth of Closure, a Labor of Love

Natalia Viera Salgado

Undoubtedly there is a deep nostalgia and intimacy in Chicago-based artist Edra Soto's installations and architectural interventions. *The Myth of Closure*—the title of this exhibition and her work, *The Myth of Closure* (2021)—is a time machine. It takes us to the balcony, the living room, the patio, the streets, and the landscape, somewhere in a house on the island of Puerto Rico. This space created in the gallery for us is a metaphor for the concept of *el vaivén* (the back and forth) and that constant movement every member of a diaspora must go through—this space is a homage to her loved ones. This movement, *el vaivén*, is also a gesture to understand the histories of migration from the Caribbean to the United States, whether forced or voluntary.

By incorporating architectural elements into her artworks, Soto reveals glimpses of her world that consists of childhood memories and her trips to the island not only through photos of all kinds of family members, objects, and places, but also the various characteristics of those places. In her earlier work *Graft* (2013–ongoing), and in the works presented in *The Myth of Closure*, this is explored further through viewfinders embedded into the *rejas*, or decorative iron screens, present in 20th-century Puerto Rican domestic architecture, or the *casa criolla*. The *casa criolla* is defined by preservation architect Jorge Ortiz-Colom as follows:

“The *casa criolla* (sometimes to be referred simply as *casa*) is the not completely satisfactory denomination for a type of traditional dwelling generally built all over Puerto Rico from the early nineteenth century up to about 1930. These dwellings present a particular ordering of domestic space that was remarkably uniform during its long period of significance, and in a wide range of locations all over the island. The *casa criolla* was an essential building block of towns and settlements during the consolidation of a society and an economy fueled by the belated growth of plantation agriculture.”<sup>1</sup>

In the Caribbean, specifically in Puerto Rico, most of the *casas criollas* designed during the post-war era have these characteristics, and if the owner has decided to preserve the *rejas*, they still remain part of the elements that make the home unique. It is through these *rejas*, specifically those on the balcony, that we can approach understanding interior and exterior worlds and take note of a kind of revealing and unveiling that takes place in Soto's works.

For Ortiz-Colom, the origins of the *casa criolla* haven't been widely investigated, but he argues that the possible origins are: "... likely to be the dwelling of propertied Anglo- and Franco-Caribbean estate owners and merchants, which already by the mid-eighteenth century had developed, in the houses located in their original islands, strong spatial order, and symmetry. With the economic incentives given since the 1780s for the development of plantations, many planters from these islands, fleeing the current turmoil that in part reflected European instability of the time, arrived in Puerto Rico to try their hand in one of two major crops: sugar and coffee. Some of these planters also brought their slaves, many skilled in building trades. There was also an influx of European immigrants also willing to try their hand at planting, and many of them intermarried with the families of relocated planters, helping diffuse cultural trends. The *casa criolla's* strong central living space may also have roots in European center-hall layouts."<sup>2</sup>

Ortiz-Colom also believes that another possible strong influence of the *casa criolla* in its constitution could be the *dogtrot house*<sup>3</sup> that can be found in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Another cultural referent for Soto's practice is architect Edwin Quiles's book *La Ciudad de Los Balcones* (2009), in which he raises awareness of the existence of Yoruba folklore and cultural influences in Puerto Rican architecture through an analysis of the houses of Villa Palmeras in Santurce. These examples establish a foundation for the origins of the architectural elements that highlight the intersections among U.S., Caribbean, and African diasporic traditions. For Soto, this underscores the fact that these connections are not taught in the Caribbean educational system, and, therefore, are not common knowledge to broader audiences. Initially, when one encounters a screen or a fence, the instinct is to stay away, but through the exploration of *rejas*, Soto offers us the opportunity to come closer. Puerto Rican houses have the characteristics of Spanish Revival<sup>4</sup> and Art Deco<sup>5</sup>, while also housing the *rejas*.

Architect and researcher Alexander Cuesta-Pantoja explains in his text "De presumir a proteger La (re)valorización de la reja arquitectónica en el Puerto Rico decimonónico" (2009) that these *rejas* were designed and constructed for safety purposes but that we slowly began to get away from that and started to use

them as a design element over time. Many of these elements with functional purposes lose their functional role and become ornamental elements. In this process of (re)valorization, the grille takes another direction. The fence takes another direction: from a secondary ornamental element, it consolidates itself as a security component. Nonetheless, they have beautifully rhythmic sequences or patterns with geometric abstraction and more complex curved patterns.

I have a vivid memory of my childhood trying to climb up these fences, or the *quiebrasoles*, which I think we all have tried to do at least once. Artist and writer Sebastián Meltz Collazo writes, "Whether it be to designate a space as private property or with restricted access, to delineate where the lands of neighboring countries begin and end, or to classify neighborhoods and their social classes as a result of their divide, a fence as a concept and construction, more often than not, takes on the task of dividing groups of people within different scales of space. At times they can act one in the same, internally, and externally, on an abstract or symbolic level. But when it comes to its actual physical manifestation, a fence can have an element of false transparency to them. These structures of separation entail the use of a set design pattern, interconnecting the material being used, and as a result leave hollow, negative spaces one can fit their fingers through."<sup>6</sup>

This intimate experience of introducing your fingers through the *reja* is very much experienced in Soto's works.

To dive into these works is to delve into a journey from Cupey to Dorado and vice-versa—*el vaivén*. The works are constructed from recycled fences and take us on a nostalgic journey through the urban landscape of Puerto Rico, specifically in the towns of San Gerardo and Cupey, where Soto grew up. For those from Latin America and the Caribbean, these familiar structures, the vernacular and midcentury architecture, and the textures of these structures are extremely familiar to us. Like many effects that modernization, postindustrial, and the post-Fordism era brought to the island, many Puerto Ricans moved from the rural to the metropolitan areas in the 1940s and 50s, incorporating themselves into more suburban neighborhoods, which grew after the implementation of Operation Bootstrap.<sup>7</sup> This was part of a governmental strategy launched to develop and modernize Puerto Rico's economy.

Two very specific houses that are part of Edra Soto's personal archive are included in this exhibition. In this new phase, as her mother is slowly losing her memory, the artist brings us to her own upbringing with a spatial and immersive, while we see her life through viewfinders incorporated in the fences or quiebrasoles, in her works *Cupey I* (2021), *Cupey II* (2021), *Dorado I* (2021), *Dorado II* (2021), *Cupey 1* (2022), *Cupey 2* (2022), and *Cupey/Dorado* (2021). Dorado is a town and municipality on the northern coast of Puerto Rico, located 15 miles (or 24 kilometers) from San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, which has now become a hub for foreign investors as part of Act 60.<sup>8</sup> Cupey is one of the 18 barrios of the municipality of San Juan and is located in the mountainous areas of this region. Several works in the exhibition are named after these two municipalities, which are almost the main characters in this story. *Excess of Joy I* (2014) and *Excess of Joy II* (2014) are works on paper, made with gouache and graphite, which could be understood to suppress tragedy and tools to survive. Their faces express a lot of emotion and happiness. *The Myth of Closure* could be understood as an altar or a type of homage to the artist's loved ones. As mentioned earlier, other elements found in these houses are also the quiebrasoles, or decorative concrete blocks, perforated walls, pivot walls, and cross ventilation while integrating natural lighting. The recurring double heart shape seen in the exhibition takes inspiration from a frame Soto found while studying at the Art Institute of Chicago. The act/gesture of framing a photo is symbolic of its importance, which also represents the emotional and cultural value these works have.

Some of these details and engagements can be seen in her earlier works such as *Graft* (2013–ongoing), in which the artist explores the vernacular architecture of Puerto Rico while also making interventions and installations in public or exhibition spaces. As the word “graft” suggests, this piece can coexist and be transplanted to existing architecture and a site-specific place while conceptually provoking all the senses to be awakened so the imaginary can start to work.

*Dominodomino* (2015), installed at the Hunter East Harmen gallery in New York, was made in collaboration with Dan Sullivan and is intended to bring the community of Harlem together. “The piece explores the relationship between design and social interactions arising from the domino game, at the same time as it collapses the distinctions between high-design furniture and contemporary art,” Soto says of the work. The work also

serves as a stage for community and conversation-building, as visitors are invited to be part of the work.

More recently, a similar gesture, *Let Love Win* (2021), was installed at the Abrons Arts Center as part of Plaza Pública. A modular domino table made in collaboration with Pública Espacio Cultural, the work is custom designed for multi-use in physically distanced reality in New York's Lower East Side. Participatory engagement is key to Edra Soto's work. By creating these works and experiences, Soto brings the community together by facilitating familial spaces that provide comfort and shelter. These types of gestures allow us to rethink our experiences of migration and displacement while at the same time not forgetting the need to create spaces for joy. In an email exchange with Soto, she shared how her interdisciplinary practice is not only embedded in visual arts, but also is informed by social practice and propelled by her motivation to create generous and inclusive experiences.<sup>9</sup>

In the work *The Wedding Cake Project* (2009), the artist is honoring her mother when she decides to recreate the wedding cake her mother made for her wedding in 2002. *Happy Hour* (2020) was another food event at Casa Rosada in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. At this event, Soto invited DJ Afrodija (the artist, curator, and musician Sadie Woods). The event took place as part of an exchange between Comfort Station in Chicago and Projeto Ativa in Brazil. Not only did attendees hear the familiar Caribbean sounds of salsa, bachata, and reggaetón, but guests were also served the party food one would generally find at a Puerto Rican party, such as *sandwichitos de mezcla*, *pasta de guayaba con queso*, *bola de fuego*, etc.<sup>10</sup> Like a cyclical gesture and a metaphor, *The Myth of Closure* offers a unique window to the Puerto Rican experience and a time machine to el vaivén. Perhaps, as curator Carla Acevedo Yates has said, we can embrace migration (forced or voluntarily) as a methodology<sup>11</sup> and keep informing our practices as members of the vaivén. This methodology is a clear constant in Soto's works, and she adds, “I ask the viewer to engage in difficult conversations like socioeconomic and cultural oppression, the erasure of history, and the loss of cultural knowledge . . . I am constantly challenging the boundaries between the audience, artist, and the work itself, prompting viewers to reconsider the nature of urban space, cross-cultural dynamics, the legacy of colonialism, and personal responsibility. Growing up in Puerto Rico and having relationships with the communities there, as well as in the U.S, is pivotal to my work through an explanation of constructed social orders, diasporic identity, and colonialism.”<sup>12</sup>

- 1 Jorge Ortiz-Colom, "The Puerto Rican Casa Criolla: Identity and Domestic Space," in *Vernacular Architecture Forum*, 2011.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Maggie Burch, "What Is a Dogtrot House?," *Southern Living* (Southern Living, October 21, 2022), <https://www.southernliving.com/home/dog-trot-house>.
- 4 "Spanish Revival," *Architectural Styles of America and Europe*, November 23, 2011, <https://architecturestyles.org/spanish-revival/>.
- 5 "Art Deco," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Art-Deco>.
- 6 Sebastián Meltz-Collazo and Arte Fuse, "Edra Soto: Casas-Islas: Houses-Islands at Morgan Lehman Gallery, NYC (Review)," *ArteFuse*, April 21, 2021, <https://artefuse.com/2021/04/16/edra-soto-casas-islas-houses-islands-at-morgan-lehman-gallery-nyc/>.
- 7 Operation bootstrap, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinapuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/Bootstrap.htm>.
- 8 Coral Murphy Marcos and Patricia Mazzei, "The Rush for a Slice of Paradise in Puerto Rico – The New York Times," accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/us/puerto-rico-gentrification.html>.
- 9 Edra Soto email to author, June 13, 2022.
- 10 To listen to DJ Afrodijia and more information about the ingredients served in happy hour, please visit Edra Soto's website: <https://edrasoto.com/section/490124-Happy-Hour-Casa-Rosada.html>.
- 11 *TILTING AXIS Carla Acevedo Yates, YouTube* (YouTube, 2017), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-H8sBhk\\_wU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-H8sBhk_wU).
- 12 Edra Soto email to author, June 13, 2022.





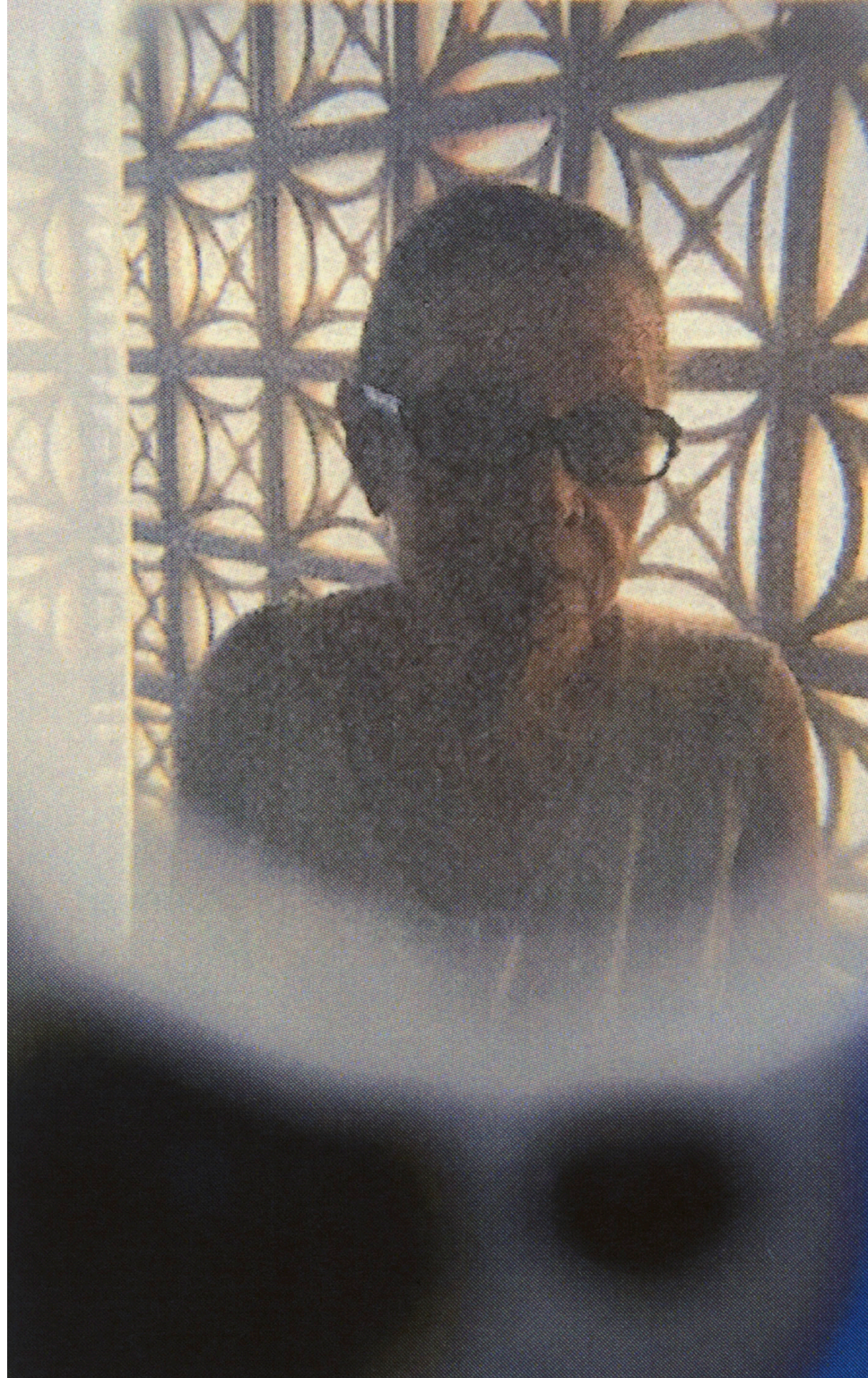




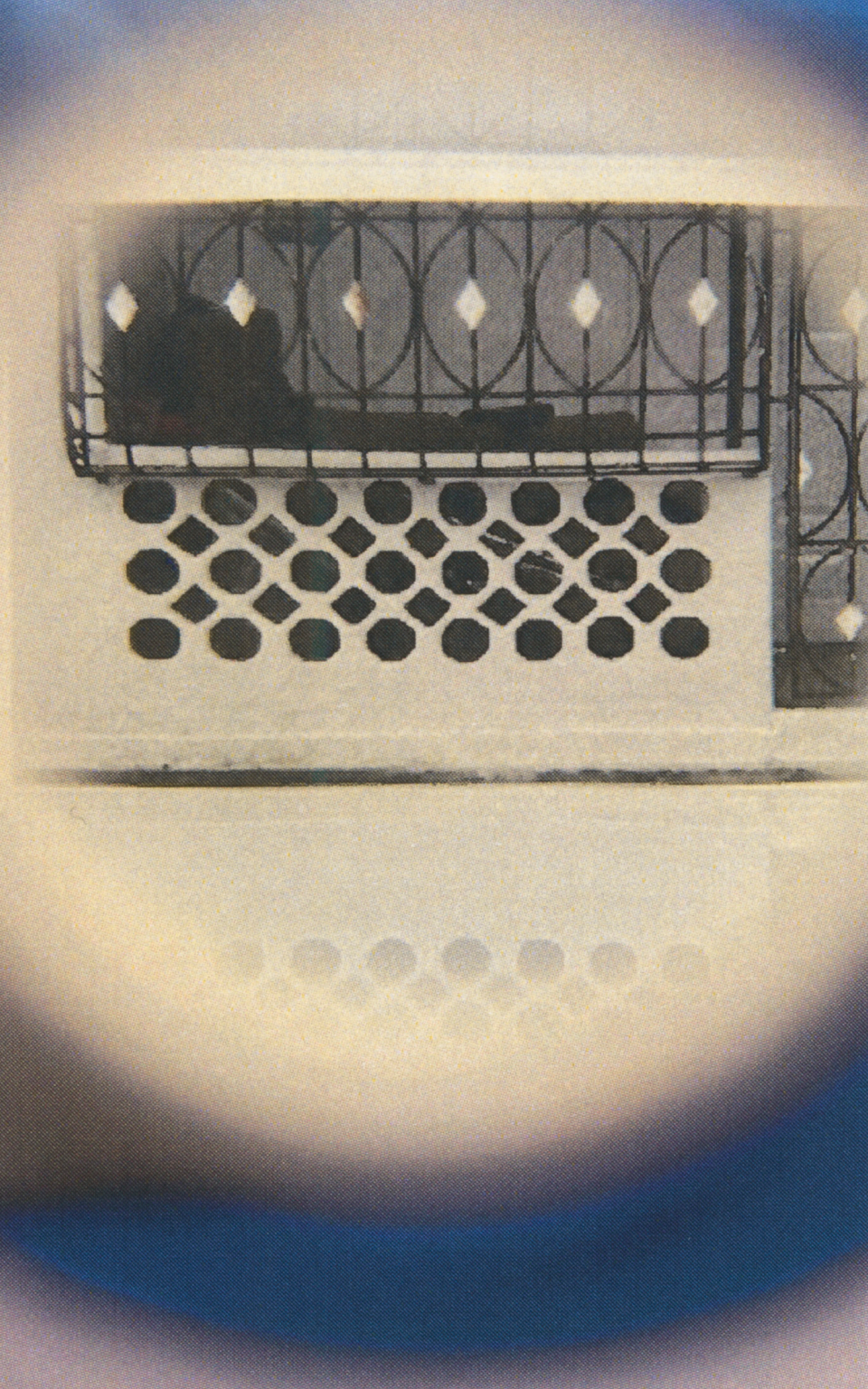




















*The Myth of Closure*  
(2021)  
MDF, plaster, paint,  
Sintra, aluminum  
tube, mirrored acrylic,  
and viewfinder  
120 × 144 × 7 inches

*Cupey/Dorado* (2021)  
MDF, plaster, paint,  
Sintra, aluminum  
tube, mirrored acrylic,  
and viewfinder  
79 × 57 × 21 inches

*Dorado I* (2021)  
MDF, plaster, paint,  
Sintra, aluminum  
tube, mirrored acrylic,  
and viewfinder  
87 × 63 × 7 inches

*Dorado II* (2021)  
MDF, plaster, paint,  
Sintra, aluminum  
tube, mirrored acrylic,  
and viewfinder  
87 × 63 × 7 inches

*Cupey I* (2021)  
Plaster, paint, Sintra,  
and aluminum tube  
114 × 57 × 20 inches

*Cupey 2* (2021)  
MDF, plaster, paint,  
Sintra, aluminum  
tube, mirrored acrylic,  
and viewfinder  
79 × 57 × 21 inches

*Excess of Joy I* (2014)  
Gouache and graphite  
33 × 25 inches

*Excess of Joy II* (2014)  
Gouache and graphite  
33 × 25 inches

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