

ArtCultureSports  
by Deutsche Bank

# Hybrid Topographies

Encounters from Latin America

February 13 – May 14, 2018





# Hybrid Topographies

Encounters from Latin America

February 13 – May 14, 2018

60 Wall Gallery | Deutsche Bank | 60 Wall Street, NYC 10005

## Artists

Karina Aguilera Skvirsky

Claudia Andujar

Iván Argote

Karen Paulina Biswell

Carlos Castro Arias

Benvenuto Chavajay

William Cordova

Ana de la Cueva

María Elvira Escallón

Nicole Franchy

Anna Bella Geiger

Virginia de Medeiros

Jesús “Bubu” Negrón

Paulo Nimer Pjota

Cover:  
Claudia Andujar (\*1931, CHE)  
*Hélio para os Brancos*, from the series *Sonhos Yanomami*, 1976  
C-print  
Arthur de Mattos Casas Collection  
Image: ©Claudia Andujar 2018

Inside Cover:  
Karina Aguilera Skvirsky (\*1969, USA)  
*The Perilous Journey of Maria Rosa Palacios*, 2016  
Video HD  
Courtesy of the artist  
Image: ©Karina Aguilera Skvirsky, video still, 2016

## Hybrid Topographies – Encounters from Latin America

by Monica Espinel

It is not possible to imagine these whereabouts without having traveled them before.

*William Ospina, Ursúa*

During Hurricane Wilma, I sat inside a darkened house enveloped by shutters, where for hours every wind gust chimed away, until finally it went silent. I exited swiftly, expecting devastation. The hurricane had passed, mangling what it could. It picked up our avocado tree, exposing its roots, and left it to rest upon the pool screen. It has been years since the avocado tree has fed us. Wilma wiped it away, but that day I had the sense that something else had sprung to life. I began to wonder about roots, what hides below, unseen, yet is fundamental.

**Hybrid Topographies** has evolved from multiple encounters with contemporary artists who have shed light on my fascination with roots - everything that nourishes or devastates them. The artists hail from different regions in Latin America, share an engagement with the landscape, whether urban or rural, and draw inspiration from their history and culture without idealizing it, connecting the past to themes that are pertinent to the current social and political landscape.

**Nicole Franchy** addresses nature's instability in *Many Changes* (2013), a diptych collage of vintage postcards and images torn from encyclopedias that depict attractive landscapes. Scenes of heaving, frothy waters make up her imaginary constructions of the natural world gone topsy-turvy. Waterfalls and forests are mashed

together, nearly drowning out the inclusion of tiny people who function as a nod to the journeys of explorers and to German Romanticism.

Franchy's use of collage allows her to appropriate existing materials, to rip them apart, efface them, and then reassemble them. This politically charged medium embodies her engagement with postcolonial theory and the reconstitution of images from memory, as well as political geography. Her inclusion of images from Ambre Mountain, a park located near Antsiranana, a port city in Madagascar formerly known as Diego Suarez, and the Bowen Falls in New Zealand, underpins the shared colonial history with that of her native Peru. These geographical dislocations also echo her peripatetic life, having lived intermittently in Rome, Ghent, Berlin, Lima and New York. One of Franchy's hybrid topographies is punctuated by a handwritten note that says, "Many changes have occurred since you first visited this place and a great deal of its natural beauty has I guess disappeared." The inscription highlights the choice of waterfalls as a metaphor for the continuous flow of change.

The imprint of colonialism and how it continues to inform the contemporary landscape is central to **María Elvira Escallón's** series, *Nuevas Flores* (2002-present). By creating site-specific interventions in the landscape and documenting

them through photography, Escallón illustrates how the natural order is often a product of cultural manipulation. After conducting botanical research to ensure the tree's survival, the artist commissioned highly skilled carpenters to shape the trunks into forms evocative of Baroque architecture. The carvings create a powerful image of the transforming action of culture on the natural environment and converge the Baroque with the contemporary, while simultaneously collapsing art genres such as land art, sculpture, and photography.

One of **Anna Bella Geiger's** most iconic works, *Brasil Nativo / Brasil Alienigena* (Native Brazil / Alien Brazil) (1977), is a suite of 18 postcards placed in two columns. The first is a set of commercial postcards appropriated by the artist depicting indigenous peoples in utopian scenes with a back caption "Brasil nativo." The second is a mirror of the first depicting Geiger, her family and friends, reenacting the scenes from the original postcards. By performing the same roles, the artist inserts herself into a dialogue about the construction of national identity; who gets to claim a place and visibility in Brazil's multi-ethnic and multicultural society, at the same time she parodies the nature of representation and the artifice of photography. With humor and critical intent, the artist questions the supposed harmony of the postcards, while conscious of being the daughter of Jewish-Polish immigrants. Geiger's piece speaks to the marginalization and lack of rights of not just indigenous peoples, but the removal of democratic freedoms by the military dictatorship imposed on all at the time.

Re-enactment is also present in **Karina Aguilera Skvirsky's** video *The Perilous Journey of María Rosa Palacios* (2016). Whereas simultaneity is present in Geiger's work, time travel and the re-enactment of her great-grandmother's migration from the Chota Valley to the coast of Ecuador in 1906 at the age of 14 stand in sharp contrast. The pace of the video is slow, like it must have been to traverse such terrain then. Opening with a close up of the artist's hair being braided, an affirmation of her Afro-Ecuadorian heritage, the scenes are infused with the picturesque splendor of the Andean countryside along her journey on foot, mule, train and boat. Conversations with an elderly relative and others along the way, point to the importance of oral history in the artist's quest for her roots. The conventional narrative is interrupted when we listen to the cameraman direct her every step down a cobblestone path, reminding us that this delirious voyage through the history of colonialism a century later is not a documentary, but rather Skvirsky's attempt to recover and reconstruct a chapter of personal and cultural memory linked to the African presence in Ecuador.

An ethnographic impulse and a deeply felt desire to try to understand the other is present in **Karen Paulina Biswell's** *Imamá* (2016), a group of fifteen portraits of three generations of indigenous women of the Embera Chamis community. Biswell adopts the stillness and gravitas of traditional portraiture by photographing them in formally controlled circumstances, presenting them alone in frontal poses against white seamless backgrounds. Their faces offer intense emotional façades that seem connected to

their life stages; the girls display a vulnerable awkwardness, the youth feel armored, and the adults appear demure and restrained. There is an immediacy that is perhaps achieved because the women are less practiced at self-presentation and because Biswell photographed the community for over four years. It started in 2012 when she met Lindelia and Albeiro, young Embera parents displaced by the internal conflict in Colombia, while they were selling beaded jewelry on the streets of Bogota. A friendship based on curiosity, trust and collaboration grew and the work reveals their proximity.

The women's dignity and resilience are also visible in unmediated details like the traditional dresses made with patterns the Spaniards brought during the colonization, and the *Okamas*, handwoven necklaces representing their role in the community. Alternating the dresses' colors creates a visual rhythm and the shape of an inverted triangle references Embera Chamis and their symbol for an animal in their drawings. The incisive portraits highlight the role of women in the community as purveyors of tradition in one of this hemisphere's oldest societies.

**Claudia Andujar's** face *Helio para os brancos* (1976) takes on a symbolic role for the nearly 60,000 photographs that her lens captured over four decades of involvement with the Yanomami in the Amazon. Afforded enormous freedom by *Realidade*, the magazine that commissioned a photoessay for an issue devoted to the Amazon, she spent four months in 1971 exploring Yanomami culture in the north of Brazil. That first sojourn

became a lifelong project combining her artistic practice with activism on behalf of Yanomami rights. In 1978 she co-founded the Pro-Yanomami Commission with French anthropologist Bruce Albert and Carlo Zacchini, a Catholic missionary, to fight for their access to healthcare and the creation of a protected area for Yanomami tribes, a goal that was finally achieved in 1992.

Born to a Swiss-French Protestant mother and a Jewish Hungarian father who died in a concentration camp, Andujar has claimed that her personal history influenced her choice to become a Yanomami advocate. Her images of day-to-day life, rituals, play and disease transmit great joy and ineffable sadness, giving us precious insight into a culture that is increasingly endangered by illegal goldminers. Part of her Dreams series which focuses on the shamanistic rituals, this photograph oscillates between a portrait and a landscape, dissolving the border between human and nature to convey the dream state entered by shamans to fulfill their roles as healers, priests, cosmologists, and keepers of botanical knowledge. The documentary format, combined with Andujar's experimental use of multiple exposures, flash-and-blur effects, color filters, and slow shutter speeds due to low light levels result in a visceral fusion of abstraction and figuration.

Activist energy also permeates **Virginia de Medeiros'** life and practice. *Fábula do Olhar* (2012-13) exposes the viewer to the lives of homeless people in Fortaleza, Brazil. She set up a photo studio at two different food banks for the homeless during six weeks where she

photographed them in black and white, and documented their lives in video. Their answer to the question: “How would you like to see yourself or like to be seen by society?” directed the outcome of each portrait, thereby turning her subjects into co-authors. Reviving the near-extinct tradition of photo-painting, de Medeiros invited artist Mestre Júlio Santos to hand-color her portraits to reflect her sitter’s desires. He retouched each portrait, adding details such as suits, jewelry and makeup. Next to each image, texts give clues into their difficult lives, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. De Medeiros inspires us to consider alternative ways of engaging with those whose lives may seem so distant from our own. Her belief in the possibility of breaking down the invisible frontiers that separate us reminds us that their fate and ours are inextricably linked.

Nowhere are these invisible frontiers as present as in our daily interactions with workers of immigrant communities who may or may not be here legally. **Ana de la Cueva’s** *Manos Mexicanas* (2017) is a series of documentary photographs that frame the hands of fellow Mexicans living in New York City. These are not the hands we are accustomed to in traditional portraiture reflecting leadership or poise; what you see is the grit of hard working hands. The straightforward photographs arise from casual encounters, whether in a restaurant, a deli, at the gym or on the streets. It is a tribute to the people who crank the nuts and bolts of this sanctuary city and a moving response to hardline immigration rhetoric and the current crack down on undocumented immigrants. The fact that we cannot see their faces imbues the anonymous

hands with the whiff of invisibility, both imposed and sought, something the subjects live with on a daily basis. The roots tied to community are manifest in tattoos of the Mexica Sun Stone and the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s spiritual protector and a potent nationalist symbol.

De la Cueva’s exploration of national symbols and identity is also present in the diptych embroidery *Arauca* (2015). The left panel with wiggly lines stitched on an otherwise empty piece of raw linen correspond to the incomplete borders of the maps of Colombia and Venezuela, and a delineation in gold demarks the Colombian-Venezuelan border between the Colombian state of Arauca and the Venezuelan state of Apure. Legend has it that back in the 1980s, this border was so porous that when Colombia’s president, Belisario Betancour, visited Arauca much fanfare went into planning for his arrival as it was one of the first visits to the region by a tenured president. Preparations included requiring all school children to wear new uniforms and crowds assembled on the streets and welcomed him by singing the national anthem. However, when everyone started singing, it was actually Venezuela’s national anthem, as locals had learned it through satellite TV. Inspired by this tale, the second panel toys with the idea of a hybrid anthem composed of the two existing anthems; black notes stand in for Venezuela’s oil industry and gold notes for Colombia’s wealth of pre-Columbian gold artifacts. The diptych highlights the abstract nature of music and the imprecision of borders. Rituals and symbols help to construct and sustain a culture, but here is a pointed reminder that patriotism cannot be enforced, it must be nurtured.

**Carlos Castro Arias’** works are known for the humor with which they comment on Colombian idiosyncrasy and identity. *Breathing through the Wound* (2011-present) is a series of sardonic drawings that reference the images created by the Chorographic Commission (1850-1862) representing the trades of the period. Some of these occupations may seem absurd today but they were valid means of subsistence. Appropriating their style, Castro’s watercolors portray the myriad self-sustaining jobs still found on the streets of Latin America today, such as windshield cleaners, acrobatic street performers, or pedestrian overpass sweepers. The drawings function like a temporal compass that is stuck, infusing the contemporary subjects with an instant historical mystique. They comment on the colonial inheritance of intense socio-racial hierarchy that is still present in Colombia, suggesting that these conditions of street life are not as new as they seem.

In *The Making of the Unicorn* (2017) Castro takes the iconography of the Cloisters’ monumental medieval works known as “The Unicorn Tapestries” (1495-1505) to tell the story behind a contemporary Colombian myth. According to Popeye, Pablo Escobar’s former hitman, Escobar’s daughter once asked to be gifted a unicorn for Christmas. To concede his daughter’s wishes, Escobar bought a thoroughbred horse and ordered a bull’s horn be placed on its head. The horse died soon after. For centuries historians have struggled to unpack the original tapestries’ religious and secular symbolism and Castro’s iteration inserts new symbols like Escobar, exquisitely dressed like one of the noblemen and the iconic entrance to his eccentric

estate, Hacienda Napole (with a replica of the Piper airplane he used for his first shipment of cocaine into the United States.) The hybrid of old world medium and new world content weaves a twisted reality with unicorn lore. The tapestry, an historical status symbol, portrays the ephemeral splendor of “having” a unicorn, while Castro’s version evokes memories of the death of an innocent horse, an apt metaphor for Escobar’s many victims.

Hybridity is perhaps best embodied in **Benvenuto Chavajay’s** *Quetzalcoatl* (2018), an object born out of a radical gesture by the artist who colored his long hair blond in 2010. After a few days, he cut it and kept it. In 2015, his golden locks were handwoven by his mother and sister, who attached them to a *faja*, the woven belts traditionally worn by Mayan women to hold up their skirts. This action connected him back to the roots and traditions of their ancestors, the Tz’utujil people from San Pedro La Laguna in Guatemala. Benvenuto then fashioned the faja in the shape of a snake, linking it to the myth of Quetzacoatl, the feathered serpent and creator deity in the Aztec pantheon. This pièce de résistance, no pun intended, uses hair as a potent symbol for the artist’s internal struggles related to heritage—a means to address the pressures of acculturation and question the validity of existing standards of beauty that are rooted in Eurocentric notions of preferred lightness.

**Iván Argote** uses the clean design, typography and content of posters, documents, and billboards as the raw material for his eye-popping 3D collages. In *Setting up a system: La Venganza del Amor* (2017) documents like the encyclopedic entry

for the Grand Canyon are laser cut with dots or honeycomb patterns, and sprinkled with doodles, geometric shapes and poetic phrases that imbue the work with affect. The layers of delicate see-through sheets held by a steel structure comment on the history of blanked-out narratives, recall disused billboards and reveal a kind of poetry of chance via superimposed texts like “deep inside, time less, very nice to meet you, peace and fear.” The layers also mirror today’s bombardment of images, signs and artifacts, and seek to create a space for the delocalization of vision and the decolonization of knowledge.

**Paulo Nimer Pjota’s** experience as a teenage graffiti artist, his daily rambles through São Paulo, his keen eye for the city’s grubby beauty and his interest in music, theory and vernacular architecture, inform his baffling and magnetic paintings. He uses large un-stretched canvas and sheets of found metal as a support for paintings that carry the weight and traces of time. Collapsing together historical artifacts, everyday objects and contemporary banalities, the artist creates meticulous renderings of masks, plants, words, vases, stickers, cartoon and historical characters. Pjota’s hybrids level the “fruits” of culture from ancient empires with the native “fruits” of modern Brazil. Mickey Mouse acts as a symbol of imperialism’s soft power in a sophisticated mix of high and low culture, and despite their postcolonial critique, these audacious paintings seem as personal as diary entries.

In a similar manner, **William Cordova’s** *Echo Me, Echo Me* (2008-9), a group of ten mixed media

collages makes extensive use of fragments salvaged from popular media and the artist’s physical surroundings. Cordova’s works address the often-overlooked connections between different cultures, ranging from parallel historical narratives to more disparate personal associations. Surprised by the sight and volume of cast-off, barely used objects on the streets of Miami where he moved from Lima as a child, his detailed drawings of wastelands and “arbitrary fictions” are often filled with a personal iconography. Speakers, cameras, microphones, vinyl record jackets, votive candles, satellites, TV antennas, and books, are drawn or pasted on stained, used, and re-purposed papers. Texts expressing scattered ideas in tiny handwriting, some of which are obliterated by black tape make one ponder and muse. Phrases like “If Hemingway had been born in Turkey the world would never have heard of Hemingway” and “The future springs from the past,” as well as dates and names - Jorge Fraga, a Cuban film director; Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté, a West African storyteller; or Arthur McDuffie, a victim of police brutality - map the vast, convoluted networks of knowledge that populate Cordova’s brain. Cordova incorporates a plurality of voices that frequently address racial politics and emancipation, opening windows to the stories he wants to be heard. The equal space given to the visual and textual elements in his work underscores the importance he assigns to both languages in efforts to understand other cultures, people and history.

**Jesús “Bubu” Negrón’s** appropriation of the marimbula - a percussion instrument from the Caribbean with African roots - as a tool for change

and community building stems from his desire to preserve and share the culture of his native Puerto Rico. Often working collaboratively, for *Marimbula* (2011) he enlisted the help of Raúl Berríos, a local musician and cultural promoter who has made invaluable contributions to the reconstruction of the island’s musical history. The instrument’s affordability, ease of construction, and portability, helped it spread throughout the region and was adopted for many types of folk music, including the combination of African and Spanish musical styles and instrumentation. The marimbula is a large, resonating box with metal strips that are plucked by a single musician. Negrón’s marimbula is recomposed as a bench that sits three people, welcoming collaborative performance and turning it into a playful site for real-life exchanges and encounters. By modifying and recontextualizing the instrument, he elevates its position and reminds us that the beauty of music is that it does not have the encumbrance of materiality thus allowing people to “take their roots” with them. A musician himself, and member of the cover band “La Exitosa,” Negrón sees music as a community affair. The piece is not only a repository of historical memory, it emanates sounds of hope and preservation.

In Negrón’s spirit, *Hybrid Topographies* weaves a multiplicity of narratives that stem from a place of encounters as a means to understand the other and as sites for change and transformation. Negrón’s gift to possibly turn the show into a raucous bomba, reflects the potentiality of art and the efforts he undertakes as part of the collective Brigada Puerta De Tierra, which is currently helping rebuild Puerto Rico after the devastation

caused by Hurricane Maria. This belief in an artist’s agency finds parallels in Claudia Andujar’s lifelong advocacy for Yanomami rights; in Virginia de Medeiros’ involvement with the Movimento Sem Teto do Centro (MSTC), São Paulo’s equivalent of the Coalition for the Homeless; and in Carlos Castro Arias’ past as an art teacher for prison inmates at Cárcel La Modelo in Bogota and his volunteer work in Tijuana’s orphanages. These artist’s voices are not those of the newly enraged, but rather those that have been steady in their activism pointing to hope and new directions.

Central to each artists’ practice is a strong interest in history, the legacy of colonialism and a quest for their roots. Combining both new and historical sources, they approach hybridity not only as a conceptual framework, but as a way to stylistically juggle and artistically experiment. Many blur the boundaries across media to address questions of identity, invisibility and otherness. By continuing to build upon existing narratives, the artists in *Hybrid Topographies* are challenging the current definitions, perceptions and labels applied to Latin Americans, while at the same time celebrating the differences and embracing the cultural mix.

*Monica Espinel is an independent curator and writer from Colombia based in New York City.*

Karina Aguilera Skvirsky (\*1969, USA)



*The Perilous Journey of Maria Rosa Palacios*, 2016  
Video HD

Courtesy of the artist  
Image: ©Karina Aguilera Skvirsky, video still, 2016

Claudia Andujar (\*1931, CHE)



*Hélio para os Brancos*, from the series *Sonhos Yanomami*, 1976  
C-print

Arthur de Mattos Casas Collection  
Image: ©Claudia Andujar 2018

Iván Argote (\*1983, COL)



Setting up a system: *La Venganza del Amor*, 2017  
Laser cut steel structure

Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin  
Image: ©Guillaume Ziccarelli

Karen Paulina Biswell (\*1983, COL)



*Imamá*, from the series *Nama Bu*, 2016  
15 analogue prints

Courtesy of the artist and Jorge M. Pérez Collection, Miami  
Image: ©Karen Paulina Biswell 2016

Carlos Castro Arias (\*1976, COL)



*Untitled*, from the series *Breathing through the Wound*, 2017  
Watercolor on paper from the late 19th and early 20th century

Courtesy of the artist  
Image: ©Carlos Castro Arias 2018

Benvenuto Chavajay (\*1978, GTM)



*Quetzalcoatl*, 2018  
Backstrap loom, cotton, artist's hair, Mayan faja

Courtesy of the artist  
Image: ©Benvenuto Chavajay

William Cordova (\*1972, PER)



Four artworks from the series *Echo Me, Echo Me*, 2008-2009  
Mixed media collage and graphite on paper

Deutsche Bank Collection  
Image: ©William Cordova 2018

Ana de la Cueva (\*1968, MEX)



*Manos Mexicanas*, 2017  
C-prints

Courtesy of the artist  
Image: ©Ana de la Cueva 2017

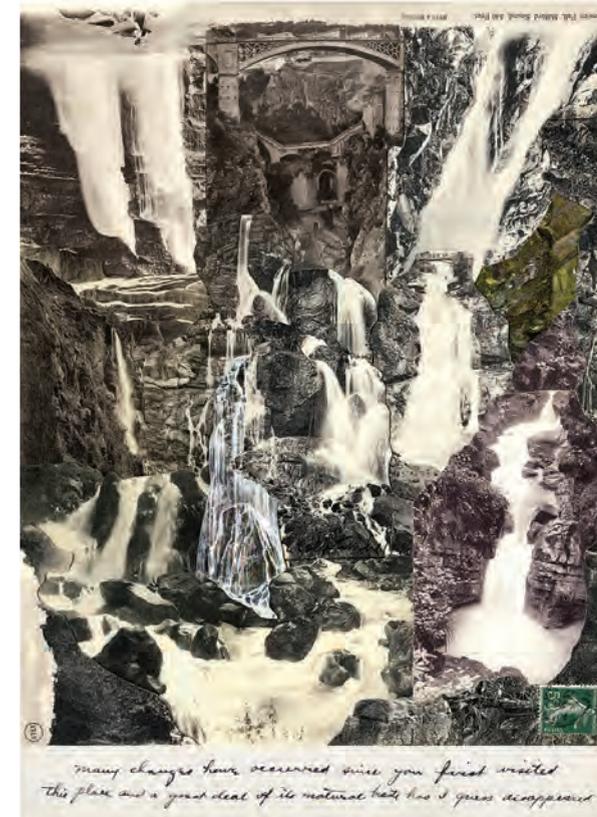
María Elvira Escallón (\*1954, COL)



Untitled, from the series *Nuevas Floras*, 2002-present  
C-print

Courtesy of the artist  
Image: ©María Elvira Escallón 2018

Nicole Franchy (\*1977, PER)



*Many Changes*, 2013  
Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist  
Image: ©Nicole Franchy 2013



Anna Bella Geiger (\*1933, BRA)



*Brasil nativo, Brasil Alienigena, 1976-1977*  
Postcards

Courtesy of the artist and Henrique Faria, New York  
Image: ©Anna Bella Geiger 2018

Virginia de Medeiros (\*1973, BRA)



*Seu Marcos*, from the series *Fábula do Olhar*, 2012-2013  
Digital photo-painting and framed text

Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler New York  
Image: ©Virginia de Medeiros 2013

Jesús "Bubu" Negrón (\*1975, PRI)



*Banco Marimbula*, 2011  
Wood and metal

Courtesy of the artist and Henrique Faria, New York  
Image: ©Jesús "Bubu" Negrón 2011

Paulo Nimer Pjota (\*1988, BRA)



*Wardrobe Door*, 2016  
Acrylic, spray paint, brick pigment, pencil and pen on canvas and iron plate

Courtesy of the artist and Richard Chang Collection  
Image: ©Paulo Nimer Pjota 2018

## Curator

Monica Espinel

## Acknowledgements

Liz Christensen  
Gallery Director and Senior Curator

Blaire Sacks  
Administration and Project Management

Elizabeth Lyons  
Intern

Art, Culture & Sports, Deutsche Bank

## Special Thanks

The artists, private collections and galleries whose loans made the exhibition possible.

Thorsten Strauß  
Global Head, Art, Culture & Sports

Friedhelm Huette  
Global Head of Art



For more info about Deutsche Bank's global art activities:  
[db-artmag.com](http://db-artmag.com) and [db.com/art](http://db.com/art)

The image shows a dark, textured surface with a reddish-brown or burnt orange color palette. The texture is uneven and grainy, with some darker spots and lighter, more saturated areas. There are some faint, vertical lines or creases visible, suggesting a wall or a piece of aged paper or fabric. The overall appearance is that of a rough, aged, or perhaps painted surface.

60 Wall Gallery  
New York, NY 10005