ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART HISTORY

BANANAS, ART, AND VISUAL CULTURE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

EDITED BY

BLANCA SERRANO ORTIZ DE SOLÓRZANO AND JUANITA SOLANO ROA

Bananas, Art, and Visual Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean

Through a diverse collection of essays on the history of art of the Americas, this book explores the cultural, political, and environmental legacy of bananas from viceregal painting and nineteenth-century photography to contemporary Latinx and Caribbean Art.

Through sixteen original essays by leading art historians, this anthology traces the banana's remarkable journey from colonial still lifes to contemporary installations. The collection examines how artists have deployed this tropical fruit to challenge imperial narratives, visualize labor struggles, and reclaim cultural identities. Expanding on the award-winning digital humanities project Banana Craze, this volume presents a comprehensive analysis of banana imagery across diverse media—religious murals, archival photographs, avant-garde paintings, and performance art. Each chapter illuminates how artists from Latin America, the Caribbean, and their diasporas have transformed this ubiquitous commodity into a complex visual metaphor that speaks to histories of exploitation, ecological devastation, and artistic resistance.

This book will appeal to scholars of art history, visual culture, Latin American and Caribbean studies, postcolonial theory, and environmental humanities.

Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano is an art historian, researcher, and cultural manager interested in the relationships between art, sustainability, and food studies in Latin America and the Caribbean. She holds a PhD in Art History and Archaeology from the Institute of Fine Arts (NY). She is based in Madrid, Spain.

Juanita Solano Roa is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Art History Department at the University of the Andes. She is a researcher focused on photography in Latin America and modern and contemporary art. She holds a PhD in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts (NYU). She is based in Bogotá, Colombia.

Routledge Research in Art History

Routledge Research in Art History is our home for the latest scholarship in the field of art history. The series publishes research monographs and edited collections, covering areas including art history, theory, and visual culture. These high-level books focus on art and artists from around the world and from a multitude of time periods. By making these studies available to the worldwide academic community, the series aims to promote quality art history research.

Materiality and The Afterlife of Artworks
The Rustle of Matter
Edited by Gabriel Cabello, Thierry Dufrêne, and Rocío Robles Tardío

Nakanishi Natsuyuki and the Global History of Postwar and Contemporary Sculpture
Accounting for Assemblage
Dan Adler

The Phenomenology of Landscape Painting
Painting Outdoors in Nineteenth-Century America
Noam Gonnen

James McNeill Whistler's Reception and Artistic Legacy
Inventing Whistlerism
Edited by Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada and Laura Valette

Bananas, Art, and Visual Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean
Edited by Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano and Juanita Solano Roa

For more information about this series, please visit: https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Research-in-Art-History/book-series/RRAH

Bananas, Art, and Visual Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean

Edited by Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano
and Juanita Solano Roa

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Designed cover image: María José Argenzio, 3° 16′ 0″ S, 79° 58′ 0″ W, 2010, Variable dimensions, Photograph part of multimedia installation.

First published 2026
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2026 selection and editorial matter, Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano and Juanita Solano Roa; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano and Juanita Solano Roa to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

With the exception of Chapter 1, no part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Chapter 1of this book is freely available as a downloadable Open Access PDF at http://www.taylorfrancis.com under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives (CC BY-NC-ND) 4.0 International license.

Any third party material in this book is not included in the OA Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. Please direct any permissions enquiries to the original rightsholder."

For Product Safety Concerns and Information please contact our EU representative GPSR@taylorandfrancis.com. Taylor & Francis Verlag GmbH, Kaufingerstraße 24, 80331 München, Germany.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano, Blanca editor | Solano Roa, Juanita editor
Title: Bananas, art, and visual culture in Latin America and the Caribbean / edited by Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano and Juanita Solano Roa.
Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2027. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |
Contents: Making the (archival) violence of the United Fruit Company visible / Kevin Coleman — Most delicate : representations of musaceae in Vicente Albán's Quito series / Sonya Wohletz — Bananas and blackness : contemporary conflations in the work of Liliana Angulo Cortés and Gonzalo Fuenmayor / Annie Mendoza and Tashima Thomas.
Identifiers: LCCN 2026008595 (print) | LCCN 2026008596 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781041216506 hardback | ISBN 9781041216551 paperback |
ISBN 9781003728306 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Bananas in art | Art and society—Latin America—History—20th century | Art and society—Caribbean Area—History—20th century | LCGFT: Catalogs | Exhibition catalogs
Classification: LCC N8214.B353 B36 2027 (print) | LCC N8214.B353 (ebook)
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026008595
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026008596

ISBN: 9781041216506 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781041216551 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003728306 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003728306

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

We dedicate this book to each other, and to the immeasurable beauty and power of friendship.

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

Contents

List of Figures *xi*
List of Contributors *xv*
Acknowledgments *xvii*

1 **Banana, Banana, Banana** 1
BLANCA SERRANO ORTIZ DE SOLÓRZANO AND JUANITA SOLANO ROA

SECTION I
From Ornament to Nourishment: Painting Bananas in the American Viceroyalties 17

2 **Beyond the Fruit Bowl: Bananas Described and Painted in the American Viceroyalties** 19
OLGA ISABEL ACOSTA LUNA

3 **Most Delicate: Representations of Musaceae in Vicente Albán's Quito Series** 33
SONYA WOHLETZ

SECTION II
Picturing Bananas, Picturing the Nation: Constructing National Identities during the Long Nineteenth Century 45

4 ***La mancha 'e plátano:* The Representations of Plantains in Puerto Rico during the Long 19th Century** 47
TAMARA DÍAZ CALCAÑO

5 **Dangerous to the Unacclimated: Bananas in US Investor Manuals on Cuba after the Spanish–American War** 58
LEE SESSIONS

SECTION III
The Long Shadow of the Banana Empire: Traces of the United Fruit Company's Photographic Archive 69

6 Archive Matter: Upheavals and the Resurgent Photographic Archive 71
LILIANA GÓMEZ

7 Making the (Archival) Violence of the United Fruit Company Visible 83
KEVIN COLEMAN

SECTION IV
Unpeeling Tropical Myths: Race, Gender, and Spirituality in Banana Imagery (1940s–1980s) 93

8 The Social, the Spectral, and the Sensual: The Gastropoetics of the Banana in the *Ofrendas* of Olga Costa and Elena Climent 95
LESLEY A. WOLFF

9 Points North: Signifying Capacities of Bananas in the Haitian Diaspora 106
PETER L. HAFFNER

SECTION V
Beyond the Banana Republic: Resisting Authoritarianism and Violence from Central America to Brazil 117

10 Yes, We Have Bananas: Art and Politics in the 1960s Brazil 119
MARIA DE FÁTIMA MORETHY COUTO

11 Un-Stilling Still Lives: A History of Art and Bananas in the Work of Moisés Barrios 131
SHANA KLEIN

12 Seeing Red in Yellow: The Gender Politics of the Blood Banana in Central American Art 142
JEANNETTE MARTINEZ

SECTION VI
Toxic Harvest: The Environmental Cost of Banana Plantocracies in Contemporary Art 155

13 **The Forms of Extraction: Banana Plantations, Modernization, and Social Unrest in Ecuador** 157
ANAMARÍA GARZÓN MANTILLA

14 **Colonial Vision: Bananas, Gold, and the Extractive View in the Art of Leandro Katz and María José Argenzio** 168
MAX GRUBER

SECTION VII
Embodied Politics and the Banana Imaginary: Challenging Neocolonial Fantasies in Contemporary Art 179

15 **Bananas and Blackness: Contemporary Conflations in the Work of Liliana Angulo Cortés and Gonzalo Fuenmayor** 181
ANNIE MENDOZA AND TASHIMA THOMAS

16 ***Plátano Power:* Subversion and Swagger in Latinx/e Art** 193
SUSANNA V. TEMKIN

Index *203*

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

Figures

1.1 Raúl Corrales, *Caballería*, 1960. Gelatin silver print, 9 7/16 × 13 1/2 in. (24 × 34.3 cm) The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the estate of Esther Parada, 2006.471 Photograph © The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Will Michels 2

1.2 Luis Camnitzer, *Flag*, 2021. Pigment-Dye-Transfer-Print (double sided) on double 250 gram Poly-Opti-Premium-Cloth, 118.5 × 199.5 centimeters. Photo by Ramíro Chaves, courtesy of LABOR; Alexander Gray Associates, New York 3

1.3 Pablo León de la Barra, *Nova Cartografia Tropical*, 2010. Color posters printed on paper, available for takeaway, variable dimensions. Courtesy of Pablo León de la Barra 4

2.1 Ceiling mural in the Hernández–Perea House depicting representations of bananas, seventeenth century, Tunja – Colombia. Photograph by Olga Isabel Acosta Luna, 2024 24

2.2 Fruit arrangements: detail from a polychromed wood altarpiece, seventeenth century, Church of Our Lady of the Nativity, Chinchero, Peru. Photograph by Andrés Madrid, 2025 26

2.3 Luis de Riaño (attributed), Fruit basket: detail in the mural painting of the Church of San Pedro de Andahuaylillas sotacoro, Peru, ca. 1626. Photograph by Olga Isabel Acosta Luna, 2025 28

3.1 DIV. III A-296, *Bromelia* [Greigla stenolepsis], signed by Francisco Escobar Villarroel. Archivo del Real Jardín Botánico, CSIC, Madrid. © RJB-CSIC 35

3.2 Vicente Albán, *Yndio Yumbo de Maynas con su Carga*, 1783. Oil on canvas, 80 × 109 centimeters. Museo de América, Madrid. Photography: Joaquín Otero 36

3.3 Vicente Albán, *Yndio Yumbo de las inmediacones de Quito*, 1783. Oil on canvas, 80 × 109 centimeters. Museo de América, Madrid. Photography: Joaquín Otero 39

4.1 Luis Paret y Alcázar, *Self-portrait*, 1776. Oil on wood, 13 ¾ × 9 ¼ inches. Collection of the Museo de San Juan, San Juan 48

4.2 Francisco Oller y Cestero, *Still-life with green plantains*, 1890. Oil on wood, 70 × 112 centimeters (framed). Private collection. Photograph by Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, used with permission 53

4.3 Ramón Frade, *Our Daily Bread (El pan nuestro)*, 1905. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, San Juan 54

5.1 José de Olivares, *Roadside Scene in Isle of Pines*, 1899. *Our Islands and Their People as Seen with Camera and Pencil*. N.D. Thompson Pub. Co, p. 85. Collection of El Museo del Barrio, New York 61

5.2 *A Native Fruit Seller*. In *Commercial Cuba; a Book for Business Men*, by William Jared Clark. New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1898, p. 392. The LuEsther T. Mertz Library of The New York Botanical Garden 62

5.3 *The Banana Around the Home*: Scene in Baracoa. Photograph. In *The Cuba Review*, vol. 6, no. 7, June 1908, p. 21. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by the New York Botanical Garden, LuEsther T. Mertz Library. | www.biodiversitylibrary.org 64

6.1 *Natives and huts—Escondido River—Nicaragua 1891*. Gelatin silver process on paper. United Fruit Company photograph collection, Box 29. Baker Library, Harvard Business School 73

6.2 (no caption). Gelatin silver process on paper, 8 × 10 inches. United Fruit Company photograph collection, Box 52. Baker Library, Harvard Business School 75

6.3 *View of cut and wrecked telephone lines like many others after the revolution, COLOMBIA*, Dec. 10, 1928. Gelatin silver process on paper, 8 × 10 inches. United Fruit Company photograph collection, Box 30. Baker Library, Harvard Business School (olvwork719209) 78

7.1 Still from *Foto robada (Stolen Photo)*, Dir. Kevin Coleman, 2024. Señal Colombia/RTVC, 54 minutes, 20 seconds. https://rtvcplay.co/peliculas-documentales/foto-robada 83

7.2 The studio portrait that accompanied a United Fruit Company memo, March 8, 1929. United Fruit Company Papers, University of Toronto Mississauga Library, Archives & Special Collections, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada 85

7.3 The United Fruit Company memo, dated March 8, 1929, that accompanied the photograph of the five labor leaders. United Fruit Company Papers, University of Toronto Mississauga Library, Archives & Special Collections, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada 86

8.1 Olga Costa, *Ofrenda de muertos (Altar of the Dead)*, 1965–1967. Oil on canvas, 23 ¾ × 31 ½ inches. National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection, 2005.15. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City 98

8.2 Elena Climent, *Altar de muertos con ancestros (Altar for the Dead with Ancestors)*, 1991. Oil on canvas. © 2025 Elena Climent 101

8.3 Elena Climent, *Altar de muertos con abuelo materno (Altar for the Dead with Maternal Grandfather)*, 1996. Watercolor on paper, 30.5 × 40.3 centimeters. Mary-Ann Martin/Fine Art, New York. © 2025 Elena Climent 102

9.1 Kathia St. Hilaire, *Melaïse*, 2023. Oil-based reliefs on canvas collage with skin lightening cream packaging, steel, aluminum, banknotes, banana stickers, silkscreen, paper, tires with polaroid, 70 × 71 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli 107

9.2 Kathia St. Hilaire, *Marise*, 2023. Oil-based reliefs on canvas collage with skin lightening cream packaging, steel, aluminum, banknotes, banana stickers, silkscreen, paper, tires with polaroid, 70 × 73 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli 108
9.3 Vladimir Cybil Charlier, *The Indigo Suites: No Chaser*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas and denim and zipper. Courtesy of the artist 111
10.1 Glauco Rodrigues, *Yes, nós temos bananas*, 1968. Serigraph print on silk, 180 × 86 centimeters. ©Acervo Glauco Rodrigues 121
10.2 Antonio Henrique Amaral, *Selva*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 170 × 122 centimeters. ©Acervo Antonio Henrique Amaral 125
10.3 Flávio Império, *Untitled (Seis mangarás)*, 1980. Screen print on paper ©Vera Império Hamburger 127
11.1 Moisés Barrios, *Bonjour, Monsieur Gauguin*, 2001. Oil on canvas, 150 × 100 centimeters. Private Collection 133
11.2 Moisés Barrios, *Bodegón de Bananos Repetido 4 Veces*, 1997. Oil on canvas, 130 × 90 centimeters. Private Collection 136
11.3 Moisés Barrios, *Banana Brush Stroke*, 1998. Oil on canvas, 150 × 110 centimeters. Private Collection 138
12.1 Tanya Flores Hodgson, *Banana Repúlica*, Identidad Subversiva Series, 2021.Photography, 20 × 30 inches. Image courtesy of the artist 144
12.2 Rachelle Mozman Solano, *A Woman Falls in Love with A Banano de sangre pura (Pure-Blooded)*, from the series *Venas Abiertas* (Open Veins Series), 2022. Pigment on paper, 71.12 × 81.28 centimeters. Image courtesy of the artist 147
12.3 Martín Wannám, *Blood Bananas*, from the series *La Eterna Injusticia* (The Eternal Injustice Series), 2022. Red candle wax sculpture installation, 8 × 1.5 inches each. Image courtesy of the artist 149
13.1 Adrián Balseca, *El Esfuerzo*, 2021. Color photograph, direct shot on 120 millimeters film, 120 centimeters × 120 centimeters. Courtesy of the artist 158
13.2 Eduardo Kingman, *Trabajadores bananeros en balsa* (*Banana Workers on a Raft)*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 147 × 118 centimeters. Private collection. Courtesy of Fundación Eduardo Kingman 159
13.3 Efraín Andrade Viteri, *Carrying Banano*, 1955. Courtesy of Efraín Andrade Viteri's family 163
14.1 Leandro Katz, *Paradox* (still), 2021. Digital video (color; sound; 30:00 minutes). Courtesy of the artist and Henrique Faria, New York 170
14.2 María José Argenzio, *3°16′0″ S, 79°58′0″ W*, 2010. Light box with dye-sublimated printing on canvas. Two parts, 94 ½ × 65 × 4 inches (240 × 165 × 10 centimeters) (detail); 94 ½ × 141.7 × 4 inches (240 × 365 × 10 centimeters) (aerial view). Collection Fundación Amparo-Museo Amparo, Puebla, México. Courtesy Fundación Amparo-Museo Amparo, Puebla, México 173
15.1 Liliana Angulo Cortés, *Negro Utópico (Utopic Negro)*, 2001. Nine photographs, 23.6 × 15.7 inches each. Private collection 183

15.2	Gonzalo Fuenmayor, Fuenmayor Banana Sticker, 2009. Sticker, 2 × 1 inches each. Private collection	187
15.3	Gonzalo Fuenmayor, *Mister Bananaman and His Spaceship*, 2013. Archival print on watercolor paper, 40 × 26 inches. Private collection	189
16.1	Miguel Luciano, *Plátano Pride*, 2006. ©Miguel Luciano	195
16.2	Lucia Hierro, *Mangucito*, 2018. Photograph by Shark Senesac, courtesy of the artist	197
16.3	Joel Gaitan, *No Pidas Agua Cuando No Hay Sed*, 2024. From the exhibition *El Solitario Se Echa Con La Muerte Y Se Levanta Viudo* at The Pit, LA. Photograph by Chris Hanke, courtesy of the artist	200

Contributors

Olga Isabel Acosta Luna is a scholar with a focus on colonial art and history. She holds a PhD in Art History from TU Dresden and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art History at the Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia.

Kevin Coleman is a historian who researches the relationships between capitalism, photography, and citizenship in modern Latin America. He holds a PhD from Indiana University and is an Associate Professor of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada.

Tamara Díaz Calcaño is an art historian interested in nineteenth-century Caribbean and European art and the artistic relationships between the regions during that period. She holds a PhD in Art History from the Complutense University of Madrid and is an Assistant Professor at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus.

Anamaría Garzón Mantilla is an art historian and curator whose work focuses on modern and contemporary art from the Andean region. She is a doctoral candidate in Art History and Theory at the University of Essex and a Professor at the University of San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador.

Liliana Gómez is an academic interested in the theory and history of photographic archives and visual cultures of the Caribbean and Latin America, arts and human rights, and environmental aesthetics. She holds a PhD from the Free University of Berlin and completed her habilitation at the University of Zurich. She is Professor of Art and Society at the University of Kassel/Kunsthochschule Kassel and the documenta Institut and editor-in-chief of the journal Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture.

Max Gruber is a Curatorial Assistant at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. His research focuses on contemporary art in Latin America and worldwide, photography, visual culture, and social practice. He holds an MA in the History of Art from Williams College.

Peter L. Haffner is an academic interested in the arts of Haiti and Afro-Caribbean, as well as global modern and contemporary art. He holds a PhD in Culture and Performance from UCLA and is an Associate Professor at Centre College in Kentucky, United States.

Shana Klein is an art historian of historical and modern US art. She holds a PhD in Art History from the University of New Mexico and is a Professor at Kent State University in Ohio, United States.

Jeannette Martinez is an art historian and researcher interested in the Central American diaspora and contemporary US Latinx art. She is a doctoral candidate in Art History at the University of New Mexico, United States.

Annie Mendoza is a Professor at the East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania, interested in Caribbean and Latin American art and literature. She holds a PhD from the University of California in San Diego, United States.

Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto is a researcher and Professor at the State University of Campinas, interested in modernism and contemporary art in Latin America. She holds a PhD from the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. She is based in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil.

Lee Sessions is the Permanent Collections Associate Curator in El Museo del Barrio in New York, interested in Caribbean art and history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Lee holds a PhD in Art History from Yale University.

Susanna V. Temkin is a interim chief curator at El Museo del Barrio, interested in art from the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Latinx/e diaspora. She holds a PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts in New York, where her research focused on modern art from Cuba.

Tashima Thomas is an art historian, gastronome, curator, and cultural critic, interested in the art of the African Diaspora in the Americas. She holds a PhD in Art History from Rutgers University and is an Assistant Professor at Southern Methodist University.

Sonya Wohletz is an independent researcher interested in the relations between image, history, and landscapes. Her work has been published in *Latin American Literary Review*.

Lesley A. Wolff is an Assistant Professor of Art and Design at the University of Tampa, Florida. Her research focuses on Latinx/e and Latin American art, Curatorial Studies, Food Studies, and Global Contemporary Art. She holds a PhD from Florida State University in the United States.

Acknowledgments

This book is grounded in a years-long investigation that first took shape as the digital humanities research project Banana Craze. Since then, the research has expanded geographically, chronologically, thematically, and conceptually, sustained by the steadfast support of a vibrant community of social media and newsletter followers, artists, scholars, and friends who have shared with us their knowledge of—and affection for—art and bananas. This transdisciplinary exchange has profoundly shaped our work and has been consolidated through the invaluable feedback we received across the many platforms where we have presented the project, including university lectures, conference panels, exhibitions, and scholarly publications. We are thankful to everyone who invited us to join these conversations, whether in person or online, and who enriched our perspective with their own.

This book would not have been possible without the dedication and rigor of its fifteen contributing authors: Olga Isabel Acosta Luna, Sonya Wohletz, Tamara Díaz Calcaño, Lee Sessions, Liliana Gómez, Kevin Coleman, Lesley A. Wolff, Peter L. Haffner, Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto, Shana Klein, Jeannette Martinez, Anamaría Garzón Mantilla, Max Gruber, Annie Mendoza, and Susanna V. Temkin. We are honored and humbled by your participation in this volume and profoundly grateful for your commitment, generosity, and belief in this project.

The open-access publication of this book's introduction has been made possible through the generous support of Equifruit. We are proud to be sponsored by a fair-trade fruit company led by bold, visionary women whose values resonate deeply with our own.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Mariana Castañeda Mosquera for the remarkable thoroughness and care with which she assisted us in assembling the manuscript files. We are also deeply grateful to Hannah Ryan, who shares our love of art and food, for her generous and thoughtful reading of the introduction.

As this book is one of the many outcomes of the research we have developed together as Banana Craze across different formats, this is also the place to thank, once again, the students, editors, designers, and translators who helped us launch our website in 2021 and who have supported us ever since. In particular, we thank Universidad de los Andes for providing the initial grant that made this research possible and for continuing to host our site; our research assistants (Lorenzo Benavides Medina, Ana María Bran Izaquita, Geraldine Moreno Beltrán, Estefanía Pereira Roa, Nicole Montealegre, Juliana Botero, and Bella Lachman), editors (Tupac Cruz and Inés Elvira Rocha), and website developers (Eida McCoy and Toquica); and the nonprofit organization Banana Link.

Above all, we owe this investigation to the artists whose passionate, incisive, and eloquent works have inspired—and continue to sustain—this journey.

We extend our deepest gratitude to our mentor, Edward J. Sullivan. He not only nurtured our love for Latin American art, taught us the language of objects, and guided our doctoral dissertations, but—most importantly—fostered a sense of community among his students grounded in care, friendship, and intellectual generosity. From our very first day, this spirit encouraged us to think together, laying the foundations for the collaboration that would eventually become Banana Craze.

Finally, we thank our families—parents, partners, and children—for their enduring love, patience, and support of our shared ventures and adventures.

1 Banana, Banana, Banana

Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano and Juanita Solano Roa

> Banana, banana, banana, banana, banana, banana, banana. Footnote 21: *Time* called Chiquita number one on the Jingle Jangle hit parade. Navy students at a Midwestern University voted Chiquita the girl they'd most like to get in a refrigerator with.
>
> —Victoria Cabezas, excerpt from *Banana Thesis*, 1973

Costa Rican artist Victoria Cabezas recalls her arrival at Florida State University fifty years ago as a graduate student as follows:

> I was thrilled to see that the bananas at supermarkets had Chiquita stickers indicating that they were from Costa Rica. [...] However, I was not prepared for people referring to Costa Rica as a Banana Republic. [...] I grew up in Costa Rica and it was my understanding that we exported more coffee than bananas, so why weren't we being called a Coffee Republic?[1]

As a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) student, Cabezas explored the "Banana Republic" trope through humor rather than anger, most clearly in her *Banana Thesis*, a manuscript made entirely of the word "banana" with extensive footnotes.[2] By mimicking academic form, the work parodied scholarly discourse while exposing the political, social, and economic consequences of banana-company interventions in Central and South America. In performances where she read the thesis aloud—including its footnotes—the repeated word "banana" also evoked the slang sense of "crazy," capturing both the absurdity and the reality of this interventionist history.

Although *Banana Thesis* dates back to 1973, the piece remains strikingly relevant today. The United States' geopolitical interests in countries such as El Salvador and Venezuela, the subjugation of small, local Latin American banana farmers by international, large-scale cultivation companies, and the prejudice faced by Latinx/e diaspora communities are just a few examples that demonstrate how the issues in Cabezas's work continue to resonate. Just as the concerns identified by Cabezas remain urgent, artists across Latin America have likewise continued to use the banana to confront histories of exploitation and resistance.

To fully understand the depth of this engagement, we must first consider the fruit's longer visual and material trajectory in the Americas. Since the sixteenth century, bananas have become deeply embedded in the region's material and visual cultures as a dietary staple, decorative motif, and linguistic term. In the colonial period, the fruit was already circulating between continents as both image and commodity. This is evident, for

DOI: 10.4324/9781003728306-1
This chapter has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license.

example, in an engraving by the Franco-Flemish artist Theodor de Bry. Although he never traveled to the Americas and produced his images nearly a century after Christopher Columbus's first voyage, his engravings were among the earliest through which Europeans encountered the New World. In *A Coconut Palm, a Banana Tree, a Pepper Tree, and Irises* (1598), the banana occupies the central and largest space, emphasizing its importance and a sense of wonder.[3] The accompanying caption—"Bananas, or the Indian fig, which provides the principal nourishment of the Indians"—already frames the fruit as a local dietary staple. By the eighteenth century, naturalists and illustrators such as Maria Sibylla Merian described the fruit as "used like an apple, and [having] a pleasant flavour"—an analogy that not only signals how familiar bananas were in the Americas but also reveals how Europeans relied on fruits native to their own context (such as apples or figs) to make sense of tropical produce and to fold it into their imagination of the region.[4]

During the nineteenth century, as plantations expanded and the fruit gained economic significance, banana imagery proliferated across maps, prints, and other illustrated media documenting the industrialization of production. In Europe, Friedrich Georg Weitsch's 1806 portrait of Alexander von Humboldt situates the scientist before banana leaves, signaling how the plant had become a visual shorthand for the lush abundance of the American tropics. This interplay between European representations of "tropical" nature and local artistic responses would shape how the banana was imagined on both sides of the Atlantic.

By the early twentieth century, the global banana trade was reshaping economies, landscapes, and imaginaries across Latin America and the Caribbean. Avant-garde artists—many trained in Europe—responded to narratives of modernization, often promoted by

Figure 1.1 Raúl Corrales, *Caballería*, 1960. Gelatin silver print, 9 7/16 × 13 1/2 in. (24 × 34.3 cm) The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the estate of Esther Parada, 2006.471 Photograph © The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Will Michels.

banana companies, by incorporating banana leaves and fruit into their work. Figures such as Tarsila do Amaral, Anita Malfatti, and Lasar Segall in Brazil, or Amelia Peláez in Cuba, integrated the motif in ways that celebrated regional identity yet seldom questioned the political forces behind its circulation.[5]

From the 1960s onward, artists in Latin America began to confront those forces directly, exposing the inequalities that multinational corporations like United Fruit and Standard Fruit concealed behind images of progress. The banana became a symbol of resistance and anti-imperialism tied to struggles over land, labor, and sovereignty. A key example is Raúl Corrales's *Caballería* (1959), depicting young revolutionaries celebrating the expropriation of United Fruit Company (UFC) plantations in Cuba (Figure 1.1). By staging the nationalization of foreign-owned land, Corrales marked a political victory while aligning the Cuban Revolution with wider Latin American movements against US imperialism.

The fruit's political charge also underpins contemporary artistic critiques of the phrase "banana republic," coined by O. Henry in *Cabbages and Kings* (1904) to describe a fictional export-dependent nation under foreign control. The term soon became a catchall for political instability and economic dependency—until, ironically, it was applied to the United States itself. After the January 6 attack on the Capitol, former President George W. Bush remarked that such events were typical of a "banana republic."[6] Artists have seized on this reversal: in 2021, Luis Camnitzer redesigned the US flag by replacing its stars with a banana (Figure 1.2), recasting the emblem to reflect what he saw as the nation's new ideology of chaos and authoritarian drift.

Figure 1.2 Luis Camnitzer, *Flag*, 2021. Pigment-Dye-Transfer-Print (double sided) on double 250 gram Poly-Opti-Premium-Cloth, 118.5 × 199.5 centimeters. Photo by Ramíro Chaves, courtesy of LABOR; Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

This explicitly political use of the banana stands in productive tension with its treatment in much international contemporary art, where, in Euro-American contexts, the fruit has often appeared in playful, ironic, or erotic registers tied to sexual identity, consumer culture, and the absurdities of mass production. Feminist critiques such as Linda Nochlin's *Buy My Bananas* (1972) mocked tropes that equated fruit with the female body under the male gaze, while artists including Andy Warhol, Sarah Lucas, Natalia LL, Anna Banana, the Guerrilla Girls, and Maurizio Cattelan explored its potential for humor, provocation, and self-reflexive critique. In Asia—the world's largest banana-producing region—the fruit circulates in visual traditions of diplomacy and exchange, appearing from temple carvings and still lifes to contemporary art. Across African and diasporic contexts, artists such as Tessa Alexander and Kosisochukwu Nnebe have likewise used the banana to question intertwined histories of colonialism, race, and representation.

Taken together, these global engagements reveal the banana's extraordinary elasticity as an artistic motif—able to oscillate between parody and critique, desire and domination.[7] Within Latin America, however, the fruit has carried a particularly charged political afterlife. Artists across the region have used it to interrogate the economic and ecological conditions that underpinned its cultivation, turning a symbol of exotic leisure into an emblem of resistance. This critical lineage has been underscored in curatorial projects such as Pablo León de la Barra's *Bananas Is My Business* (2011) and *Novo Museo Tropical* (2012), which frame the banana as a site of geopolitical and cultural struggle in Brazil and the Southern Cone (Figure 1.3).

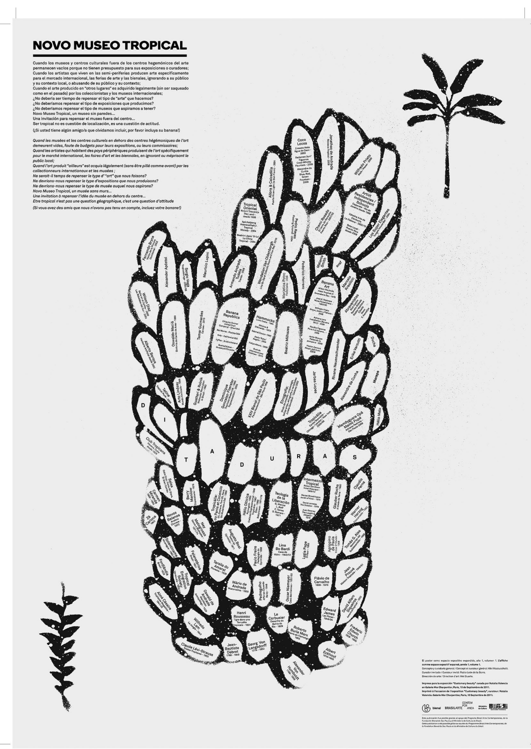

Figure 1.3 Pablo León de la Barra, *Nova Cartografia Tropical*, 2010. Color posters printed on paper, available for takeaway, variable dimensions. Courtesy of Pablo León de la Barra.

This book explores how bananas have been represented in art and visual culture from the colonial period to the present, revealing their enduring role in shaping Latin American and Caribbean imaginaries. *Bananas, Art, and Visual Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean* traces the visual history of a non-native species that became a potent symbol of the Americas. Through analyses of frescoes, paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, and installations, this volume shows how artists have used the banana to critique histories of empire, labor, gender, and cultural identity. Spanning five centuries and varied approaches, the essays present the banana as both subject and lens for understanding power, hybridity, and belonging across the region and its diasporas.

A Brief History of Bananas

Today, bananas are the most widely consumed fruit in the world.[8] Nearly three-quarters of global banana exports originate in Latin America, with about one-quarter coming from Ecuador alone.[9] Although bananas are now an everyday staple in supermarkets worldwide, their presence outside their native regions is the result of centuries of agricultural expansion, trade networks, and corporate influence. Originally from Southeast Asia, the banana was introduced to the Americas through Spanish colonization in the early sixteenth century. Most scholars agree that bananas likely reached the Americas from the Canary Islands. The plant was brought by the Portuguese from Equatorial Guinea to the Canaries, from where it was introduced to the Caribbean around 1516. As historian Manuel de Paz has argued, the archipelago served as a "laboratory" for Spain's colonial project in the Americas, testing both the acclimatization of crops like bananas and the plantation model later exported across the Atlantic, including large-scale enslaved labor.[10] European settlers, seeking efficient ways to sustain enslaved labor populations—nourished primarily by plantains—fueled the rapid expansion of banana cultivation across the Caribbean and Latin America, embedding it in the agricultural economies of the region's nations.[11] Over time, the banana was no longer perceived as an imported crop but rather as an intrinsic part of the region's landscape and cultural identity. It is one of the central paradoxes of this history that a species brought from Asia by way of Africa and Spain became the quintessential emblem of the "tropical" Americas: an introduced plant that came to stand for an environment imagined as native.

Bananas entered global trade in 1870 when Captain Lorenzo Dow Baker brought 160 bunches from Jamaica to the United States. They survived the voyage and by selling them he paid for his ship's repairs, revealing their profit potential. Sensing an opportunity, Baker acted fast. He bought land in Port Antonio, Jamaica, and established the Caribbean's first major banana plantation.[12] In 1885, he partnered with an emerging fruit entrepreneur named Andrew Preston. Together, they founded the Boston Fruit Company with the goal of making bananas "more popular than apples."[13] They revolutionized the banana business by introducing refrigerated shipping, a technology that allowed bananas to travel longer distances while still green. This marked the beginning of a transnational industry that would reshape agricultural labor, land ownership, and economic dependencies across the Americas.

However, land in the Caribbean was becoming scarce, prompting plantation owners to seek new territories for expansion. It was then that Baker and Preston partnered with Minor Cooper Keith, a businessman from Brooklyn who was building Costa Rica's first railway and had begun planting bananas to feed the workers. Together, Keith, Preston, and Baker founded the now-infamous UFC, known today as Chiquita Brands. The company