

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ben Luke, "Picks," *Artforum*, January 2011.

## Allora & Calzadilla

LISSON GALLERY | LONDON

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Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's *Returning a Sound*, 2004, follows a motorbike-riding former activist around the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, a US bomb testing site for decades. A trumpet welded to his exhaust pipe blurts a fluctuating sound track as he revs the engine and the bike picks up speed or negotiates bumps. It heralds the victory of the test site's closure, which the artists witnessed while taking part in the civil disobedience campaign that forced the US military to abandon the island in 2003, and it celebrates the reassertion of the people's voice over their land, but is also an amusingly sardonic take on anthems, reinforcing the fragility of the popular voice against the might of bombs.

The films Allora & Calzadilla have made on the island since 2004 are shown together here for the first time. The stuttering negotiations for Vieques's future are satirized in *Under Discussion*, 2005. A man sails an upturned table with an outboard motor around the island, foregrounding its surreal landscape: verdant tropicality and picture-postcard beaches next to a scarred, wreckage-strewn dystopia.

Shown in the duo's 2011 Venice Biennale presentation, *Half Mast/Full Mast*, 2010, features pairings of static shots of various Vieques landscapes and interiors. At the left of each image is a flagpole, from which gymnasts hoist themselves horizontally, becoming human flags. In the top screen, the "flag" is shown at full mast, denoting a site of victory in the people's struggle, but in the lower image, at half-mast, it signifies the location of a setback. We are left to speculate about why the different sites represent different fortunes. But whatever delight Allora & Calzadilla must have felt following the US military's departure, they scrupulously avoid triumphalism, partly through their enduring taste for the absurd. These videos add up to a profoundly ambiguous and complex rumination on Vieques's landscape, its contentious past, and the struggles to define its future.



Allora & Calzadilla, *Half Mast/Full Mast*, 2010, two-channel high definition color video projection, 21 minutes 11 seconds. Installation view.

— Ben Luke