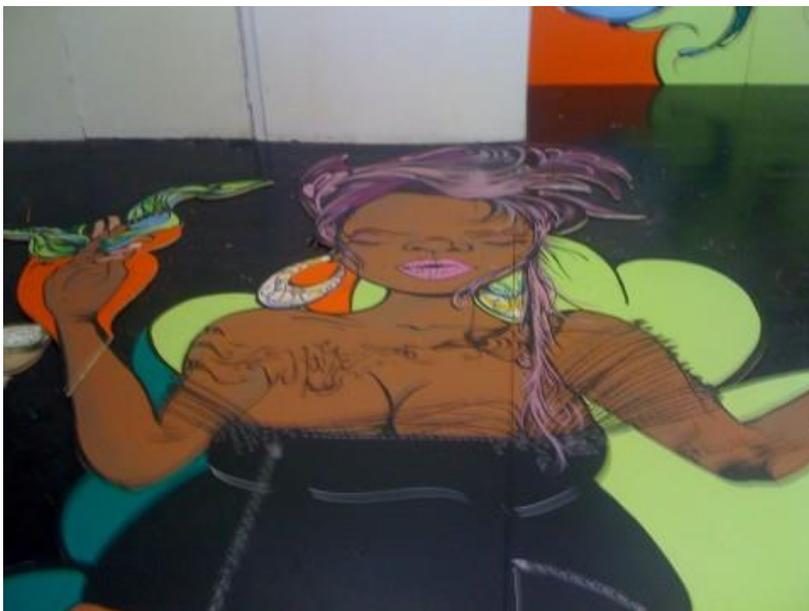


## Times Square Mural Provokes Discussions

by Tamara on March 16,  
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Sofia Maldonado is an emerging artist surrounded in controversy sparked by the imagery she created for a mural on 42nd St commissioned by the Times Square Alliance. The mural is consistent and reflective of Sofia's body of work — illuminating, highly detailed, vibrant and provocative. What's causing the controversy is Sofia's interpretation of women.



The gripes are focused on the suggestive nature of the Black and Latino female figures who appear in the landscape of the mural. The women have long fingernails and are shown in alluring positions. (Sofia says they are dancing.) Critics who first appeared on Fox News, a news source not exactly known for its support of the arts, say that Sofia is regurgitating the images of Times Square's past as a haven for sexual trafficking, and portraying a negative stereotype of Black and Latino culture.

The association is taken widely out of context. These are Sofia's women

— and they have appeared in much of her work, an evolution of her vision and interpretation of culture

she ingests as a new New Yorker. The 26-year old painter is of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent who moved to Brooklyn from San Juan in pursuit of an MFA at Pratt Institute, which she completed two years ago.

Sofia spoke about her intentions to Sylvia Harvey of the The Daily Voice. Here's an excerpt from that interview:

*HARVEY: How did you come up with the concept for the mural? Who are the women you've painted?*

*MALDONADO: I wanted to portray the untold story. The characters in [this piece] are strong looking and in control of their sexuality. They represent captivating women I have encountered: the brave, strong, and tough women who have to overcome daily struggles. Women that have to impose themselves in a male-dominated world, in a post-feminist society these women can own their bodies in a powerful way without being depicted negatively.*

*HARVEY: So you don't think these women are being portrayed negatively?*

*MALDONADO: No. While working on a project in Hartford, Connecticut, commissioned by Real Art Ways, I was placed in a Puerto Rican community. The community identified with my characters and did not feel offended.*

*HARVEY: Did you talk to community members about the mural?*

*MALDONADO: Yes. As an artist, I understand the importance of interacting with the locals before painting a mural in their neighborhood. Women that worked at a nearby nail-art salon decorated characters in the mural. They applied their aesthetic with acrylic nail designs, painting long eyelashes, glitter eye shadow, bright lipstick, tattooing their names and adorning their bodies with piercing. I wanted to share this with New York.*

*HARVEY: Critics have accused you of generalizing black and Latina women by the depictions in the mural. Is that the case or is it a case of airing a cultures so called "dirty laundry?"*

*MALDONADO: I have no intentions to generalize a specific culture. Women should be respected despite their attire: it shouldn't be limited to high-couture or corporate wear. I am not interested in representing the typical canons of "perfect beauty" that people see in magazines or on television.*

*Dirty laundry" should be shown about every culture. Censorship and image editing is one of the biggest issues in our society today.*

Maldonado's work was received with acclaim at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Conn. where she constructed a public mural and in Havana, Cuba where she staged the exhibit Skate My Patria, an ode to

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international skateboarding culture. In short, Sofia has fleshed out her subject matter and refined her content through study, consideration and engagement of her imagination—the artist’s way.

I first met Sofia at her parents’ home in San Juan several years ago, a home filled with art on the walls and rich with culture and progressive discussions. Still an undergrad student, Sofia was attracting attention in the San Juan scene for her colorful, lush, detailed painting style. I saw her handiwork at the Candela art gallery in Old San Juan, and was impressed by her distinctive approach.

I’ve watched Sofia’s work evolve, and in that time have also grown closer Sofia. She is part of a new generation of painters, women whose voices are underrepresented in the art world. Sofia shouldn’t have to soften her subjects or adhere to a standard that doesn’t represent her work to satisfy public demand for women with briefcases, as one community advocate demanded. Sofia has done what artists should do — generate dialogue. It’s telling that suggestively-dressed women are seen as prostitutes while conversely, billboards displayed in the area portray women in equally revealing attire, selling products, albums and television shows. It’s troubling that artists are attacked and generate the ire of censors, while the large scale advertisers go unchecked for blatant use of degradation to sell, sell, sell.

The only thing that Sofia is selling is her paintings. Sofia isn’t doling out a product, a sex club, or encouraging sexual trafficking, or trying to represent the entire Black and Latino experience. She’s an artist communicating her vision — a sliver of New York life open for interpretation by the beholder.

