



A sliver of tropical Puerto Rico blooms on snowy Latimer Street



By [Peter Crimmins](#) · December 19, 2020



 El Yunque, Puerto Rico's tropical rainforest, is on display on The Print Center's windows at 16th and Latimer streets. (Peter Crimmins/WHYY)

Just as Philadelphians are digging out from their first real snowstorm in almost two years, a large bay window on Latimer Street in Center City serves as a portal to a tropical oasis. The [Print Center](#), at 1614 Latimer Street near Rittenhouse Square, is now featuring a large-scale photograph of El Yunque, a tropical rainforest in Puerto Rico. At six by seven feet, the picture of a dense, green jungle, centering a large fern dappled by golden sunlight, is just about life-size.

“I wanted it to give the feeling when you’re looking at it that you’re looking at a different place,” said photographer Jaime Alvarez.

Alvarez grew up in Puerto Rico, in a suburban town just outside the capital San Juan, and left when he was 18. Now, 23 years later, he lives with his wife and son in [Fishtown](#), working as both a fine art photographer and a photographer for hire. Whenever he visits the island, he always makes time to walk through El Yunque.

“It’s a really special place,” Alvarez said. “It’s something I probably took for granted when I was younger, but now that I’ve been away from Puerto Rico for so long, I treasure it so much more.”

He said it’s a “magical” place, not just because it’s [the only tropical rainforest in the United States](#). It also holds [mysteries](#). Alvarez remembers as a child being told not to go into the forest alone, “because you’ll be [abducted by aliens](#).”

“There are lots of alien stories,” he said. “There are stories of Taíno Indians still living in El Yunque forest – which I don’t believe is true.”

The Print Center asked Alvarez to contribute an image to its ongoing “Windows on Latimer” exhibition initiative. The exhibit began in August in response to the forced closure of indoor galleries in March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Every month, the Print Center has an artist design an image for the bowed window, its 15 glass panes overlooking the narrow street. Photographers and printmakers have used the window to respond to both its unusual format – a grid of panes curved outward – and to the current moment: the first installation in August featured an extreme close-up image of an essential Black woman worker’s face by photographer Shawn Theodore.

In November, when Print Center curator Ksenia Nouril approached Alvarez to install a photograph in her window, she knew winter weather was nigh. After this week’s storm, icicles hanging on the fire escape dripped between the viewer and the image.

“We consider these site-specific installations,” Nouril said. “We wanted to bring a bit of the tropics to wintry Philadelphia. The fact that it snowed, and really gave a stark contrast to his gorgeous tropical image, is all the better. We couldn’t have asked for a better backdrop for it.”

In addition to being a reminder of warmer days ahead, the image is also a reflection on ecological fragility. The forests of Puerto Rico are routinely devastated by hurricanes. After Irma and Maria in 2017, much of the island’s foliage was completely wiped out. It takes several years for the forest to begin its natural recovery.

“The island has been hit hard in the past few years. After Maria were [earthquakes](#), the observatory in Arecibo just [came crashing down](#),” Alvarez said. “The window is a portal to see something else that’s real, that’s sensitive and amazing, and the source of so much life.”

Alvarez’s photo in The Print Center window went up in early December and has been extended through January. Nouril has plans for at least a half-dozen more installations into 2021.

“One thing the pandemic has been teaching is the versatility and malleability of our skills. There are many things we can do that are right underneath our noses,” said Nouril, pointing out that The Print Center has been on Latimer Street since 1917.

“We’ve always had this bay window and we have never used it in such a manner. The fact that we have harnessed this, and understand how to use it, is exciting,” she said. “I think we will continue to use the window in some way or form.”