THE
SUPPER
CLUB
What does it mean to have a seat at the table? Ask artist Elia Alba, and her many guests—artists and otherwise—who have attended the twenty-five Supper Club dinners over the past five years, and that question will be met with many different answers. Although the first meals took place in restaurants, in recent years the level of production for each gathering has been formalized. For each dinner, Alba plans the menu and identifies a host—an artist, intellectual, or art historian with a keen understanding of current cultural politics—who provides a prompt thematically framing the dinner conversation, to provoke a discussion about race and visual culture. One of the most complex aspects of planning each dinner is finalizing the guest list. For the last three years, in addition to organizing the dinners, Alba has also personally cooked the meal in preparation for her guests’ arrival. A seat at the table means more than just simply being a dinner guest. Alba initiated The Supper Club as a photography project, by staging portraits of her friends—artists of color—as a means to explore and celebrate the diversity of cultural and artistic identity, specifically as it relates to race. Her interest was sparked by the media’s lack of diversity, which is writ large in the annual Hollywood Issue of Vanity Fair magazine and the Academy Awards, both glaring examples of the media overlooking the accomplishments of people of color. Alba’s first portraits, which took place in the summer of 2012, included artists David Antonio Cruz, Mickalene Thomas, Lina Puerta, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Las Hermanas Iglesias, among others. As Alba continued to approach other artists to sit for subsequent portraits, she decided that hosting dinners was a way to give voice to those featured in the photographs. And so, a journey of dinners, discussions, and the staging of portraits has evolved into a complex network of relationships. Each dinner has hinged on specific conversations, concentrating on a range of themes, bringing new participants to the table on subjects like Identity, Race, and Baltimore, a Tribute to Freddie Gray; Finding Sanctuary After Orlando; Queer Intersectionality; What Would an HIV Doula Do?; and The Prospect of Race Relations Post Obama, to name but a few. To date, all of the thematic conversations have been recorded as part of a larger effort to produce a book about The Supper Club, which will feature the portraits alongside excerpts of these dialogues.

In developing this layered project, Alba is not concerned with following the logic of socially engaged art, perhaps because her practice is rooted in photography and sculpture, informed by her early experiences in the fashion world. Alba’s process reflects an understanding of how seamlessly art can overlap with life, and how social relations inform the production of visual culture. Having hosted informal dinners for artist friends for nearly two decades, the dinners within The Supper Club are an extension of her everyday life. A precedent to Alba’s project is Carrie Mae Weems’ The Kitchen Table Series (1990), begun in 1989 with self-portraits representing women seated at the table, accompanied by text that intimately revealed their relationships and daily lives.1 Of the series, art historian Robin Kelsey writes:

“Kitchens and streets. You could write a history of the twentieth century through that pairing. If the city street is a place of random encounter, of hustle and protest, the kitchen is a place of intimate habit, of sharing and aroma...The street presses into the kitchen, stocking shelves and burdening conversations. The kitchen is a delicate sanctuary, vulnerable to the threat of violence, and to the prejudice and fear that abound outside.”

One of the recurrent threads of discourse linking many of the gatherings at The 8th Floor is the notion of privilege. The privilege of being invited to sit at the table, to be part of an oral history and growing archive of conversations that have responded to both historical questions, such as the history of race in Latin America and immigration to the United States, and contemporary issues related to gender politics and race.

It is important to acknowledge the people involved in the dinners—the hosts, the guest-participants, those who work closely with Alba to produce each event and meal—
and to recognize the political nature of the invitation. When The Supper Club began in 2012, Alba, with the support of Recess Art, hosted the first three dinners at restaurants in Brooklyn: Tripoli, Kaz an Nou, and Joloff, with fifty artists in total. With the participation of many influential figures—Maren Hassinger, Coco Fusco, Clifford Owens, Lorraine O’Grady, Sanford Biggers, among them—an awareness of the project began to expand in terms of art world recognition. A partial listing is not sufficient, as it is all of the artists who sat for portraits, combined with nearly five-hundred dinner guests, that make the project whole.

Alongside the excitement of being invited is a palpable tension around omissions. Why was a certain artist not included? Why did another invited artist not show up? That the privilege of being at the table has come up repeatedly as a point of discussion over the last three years makes it clear that there is a sense of responsibility in accepting the invitation to participate. The dinners are recorded, and what is said is likely to be included in the forthcoming book. Alba’s hospitality, dedication to preparing the meal, and welcoming presence, have a profound effect on everyone at the table. Participants react in a variety of ways, some are more vocal, for others, the experience is more subdued, reflective, or just about listening. Alba’s openness and capacity for listening is integral to the project’s evolution: sorting through the suggestions and ideas for dinner themes, understanding the importance of including artists she did not know personally in the portraits, as opposed to solely those who were an active part of her community at the moment of the project’s inception.

This process of listening meant that when Clifford Owens suggested having a black male dinner, the politics of further limiting participants—from artists of color to men only—were given serious consideration. In the end, Derrick Adams and Owens, both featured in the portrait series, agreed to host the dinner together. Organizing the Block Male Subjectivity dinner opened up the idea of not one, but two dinners based on Black Female Subjectivity, the first hosted by art historian Dr. Brandi Summers and the second by artist Simone Leigh.

Going back to the very first dinners in the fall of 2012, Alba and Allison Freedman Weisberg, Executive Director and Founder of Recess Art, kicked off the conversation by introducing the guests to “Chuleta,” the host of the dinner, performed by artist Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz. The dinner officially began after Chuleta remarked:

"...I’m less interested in the art world per se, and I’m more interested in how the art world works, and what the art world has to say about us, and what we say in return,” she ventured. “...how do you identify yourself? Who are you? Are we— is this a table of artists of color, or are we just a bunch of artists? Is that a hat that we take off and put on when it’s convenient? Like, what’s up?"

As the conversation unfolded, ideas arose about the expectations of art viewers and consumers. Specifically, how did this group of artists consider their own racial identity in connection with the expectations placed on artists of color? Other topics covered how artists at the table perceived the difference between identifying as a ‘black artist’ and ‘artist of color,’ ultimately questioning what it means to identify with a community, of color or otherwise.

2012 marked a significant shift—one that seemed to register more vividly outside of the black community—when police violence against African Americans and people of color was thrust into the national spotlight, following the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. In the years that followed, these police shootings (or in Martin’s case, shooting by a neighborhood watchman) were more frequently covered in the media. The deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, had increased visibility outside the black community in part because of technology, social media, and the ease with which bystanders could now record these grim encounters between citizens and law enforcement. The Black Lives Matter movement, born from the #BlackLivesMatter campaigns, gained momentum and reached a critical mass in 2015 with the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The movement’s online organizing and social media presence allowed millions of people to join the fight against systemic racism and police brutality.

5. The Female Gaze (Mickalene Thomas), 2012. Photographed on Lighthouse Beach, Fire Island, NY.


In skin tones that suggest a multitude of races, but are drawn solely from Alba’s own body. As Estévez tries on each suit, he gestures as if to ask, what if I were d... something or someone other than myself?

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Blurring the boundaries of race and gender for over a decade, Alba’s practice has long resisted categorization in terms of movement coalesced and has informed waves of activism related to resistance against the policies espoused by the Trump presidency. Although The Supper Club began with questions about what it means to be an artist of color, and was not initially focused on events like Martin and Brown’s deaths, it is no coincidence that, in recent years, Alba grew more vocal about race in her practice. Her previous work referenced race in a provocative way that embraced ambiguity. A hallmark of her photographs and sculptures is the use of masks to construct hybrid identities, creating situations that explore what happens when the signifiers of race, gender, and age are scrambled, prompting the viewer to question how these details are to be decoded. For her 2003 series Onnagata, she produced portraits of friends wearing photographic masks. Onnagata, the Japanese term for “woman’s manner,” refers to male actors who performed as women in Kabuki theater. In this series, Alba established a subtle ambiguity as to both the gender and race of her sitters. The same year as Onnagata, Alba made If I were a…, a performative video in which Supper Club artist Nicolás Dumit Estévez tries on three different body suits, constructed by Alba with the help of her mother, Elia R. Alba. Each suit is a photo transfer collage of the female body, representing fixed identities. In 2008, she continued with mask-making, producing photographs of fantastic, multi-racial individuals. Through the use of wigs, makeup, and photographic masks that distort the wearer’s age, their personae incorporated signifiers of multiple ethnicities, and transferred gender from male to female, and somewhere in between.

With projects like Onnagata and If I were a... in mind, The Supper Club portraits are a logical progression of Alba’s experiments in the construction and visual interpretation of identity. What has shifted is the intimate nature of her relationship with her subjects. Alba worked closely with each of the sixty artists to generate a staging concept and to develop a set, whether it be in her studio, the artist-subject’s own studio, or another location altogether. Her capacity to synthesize elements of each sitter’s personal identity, artistic sensibility, and themes of their own artistic practice are reflected not only in the final photographs, but in the moniker bestowed upon each artist in their respective portrait title.

Site has also played an important role for many of the portraits. With locations like Inwood Park, where Nicolás Dumit Estévez, and Maren Hassinger were photographed as The Monk
7. The Syncretist (Sanford Biggers), 2014. Photographed in Pine Brook, Tilton Falls, NJ.
8. The Orisha (Juana Valdes), 2014. Photographed in Key Largo, FL.


(2013) and The Spiritualist (2013), respectively; Weeksville Heritage Center’s Hunterfly Road Houses, the backdrop for Dread Scott’s portrait The Revolutionary (2015); and the sand dunes of Provincetown, where Heather Hart’s image as The Oracle (2012) was taken, the surprisingly versatile location for many of the portraits turns out to be Alba’s own studio. Kalup Linzy as The Stor (2015), Michael Paul Britto as The Comedian (2013), and Zachary Fabri as The Thinker (2014), strike some of the most dramatic poses, with colorful mise-en-scène that confirms Alba’s unique vision, whether inside the studio or out.

Viewing the portraits collectively, a through line emerges. Alba’s conceptual framing, staging, lighting, and art direction, with costume design by her mother and Jennifer Prosser’s makeup, result in striking effects.

Fantasy connects nearly all of the photographs, the possibilities of which are seemingly endless, and encompasses even the unimaginable. Portraits like The Storyteller (Firelei Báez), 2014, The Female Gaze (Mickalene Thomas), 2012, The Charmer (Shinique Smith), 2015, The Pulsar (Abigail DeVille), 2014, and The Hero (Shaun Leonardo), 2014, are prime examples of fantasy personae.

Firelei Báez, The Storyteller, creates color saturated and highly patterned paintings, embedded with references to colonial histories and narrative imagery, visualizing the restrictions placed on women living in the Americas during Spanish occupation. Báez’s paintings

“...And the whole thing is that we are unable to recognize diversity. That’s what happened. And we really have to. We have to say, ‘We are free. Everybody sitting here is black, and a woman.’ We have to be able to say that. And we have to be loving about that, whatever it means. And whether somebody is a little lighter, or had a different language that they spoke at birth, it doesn’t matter. And that goes for everybody. Not just black women from various cultures, but everybody.”

— Maree Barnes, April 29th, 2017, The 4Th Floor

and collages have a cache of hidden, layered meanings, inscribed with struggles of daily life for women of color. The larger effect is one that suggests an alternate reality of unhibited freedom, a life free of oppression. Alba’s portrait depicts Báez as a figure from one of her own paintings, an electrified beauty.

Similarly sit, Shinique Smith, The Charmor, embodies the sensibility of her fabric and textile-based works, where collaged fabrics are applied onto canvas like a painting, and bundles of salvaged, patterned fabrics are assembled into monumental structures. Although aesthetically suggestive of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, Smith’s sculptures and paintings are imbued with personal meaning, inherent in the found materials that accumulate in the production of her work.

Another prominent thread in Alba’s work is the potential for the female gaze to enable fantastic counternarratives and radical possibilities for self-identification. The “male gaze,” a term coined by film critic and cultural theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975, acknowledges the increased normalization of representations of women in film for male consumption. The female gaze, a counter to Mulvey’s term, is determined by women as both story tellers and protagonists. Alba’s portrait of Mickalene Thomas, The Female Gaze (2012), adds another layer to the feminine perspective, the female-on-female gaze. She captures a rare, intimate view of Thomas, whose
practice is outwardly focused, celebrating women and an expanded notion of beauty. While Thomas’ paintings are often intensely detailed with appliquéd rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel, Alba’s photograph on Lighthouse Beach in Fire Island, New York, casts Thomas in the ethereal light of the seascape, highlighted with body makeup and minimal fabric to a painterly effect.

Several artists represented in The Supper Club series are depicted as messengers or mediums: Heather Hart as The Oracle (2012), Nicole Awai as The Kaisonian (2014), Maren Hassinger as The Spiritualist (2013), Jeffrey Gibson as The Disco Shaman (2015), and Clifford Owens as The Conduit (2014). Renowned for his 2011 project Anthology, Owens’ practice has involved engaging other artists of color to create a compendium of African American performance art history. By soliciting scores from his peers, he has acted as a conduit, amplifying performance-based potentials. Alba's photograph of Owens is set in a house of mirrors that multiply his figure into what registers as a never-ending, reflexive Rorschach pattern. As The Oracle, Heather Hart channels desire through otherworldly spirituality. She describes an oracle as “an object, temple or person that gives prophecy, wisdom or truth to the seeker.” Hart’s recent sculptural series outlined by the setting sun.

Moving from the rooftops of Brooklyn to the sand dunes of Provincetown, Alba has styled her as a priestess set against a surreal landscape.

“When we talk about how things are opening, and we see all these video tape of this violence, because people can see it now they understand it more... It’s for those people that never believed, that thought we were over-exaggerating— the white supremacists—that now it’s being let out. And, of course, they’re going to shut it down! Because it uses the power dynamic. It’s really all about power dynamics. They don’t want us to ever feel safe, because if we do they lose control.” — On Rodney Fox, August 18th, 2016, The 4th Floor

Playing off the natural landscape and built environment, Alba’s Kaisonian positions artist Nicole Awai under the Steeplechase Pier on Coney Island. Her moniker refers to a performer of kaiso music (the basis of calypso, popular in Trinidad and Tobago, where the artist was born. With origins in Nigeria and the Congo, kaiso music found its way to the Caribbean in the 18th century. Like Awai’s work, the narratives in kaiso songs often have a political subtext. The staging of this photograph represents one of many magical moments of artistic synthesis in the project. Originally, Alba wanted to photograph Awai in the Caribbean, but was attracted to the Pier because it reminded her of the Door of No Return in Senegal, a portal through which enslaved Africans would walk before being loaded onto ships. In the 1970s, Africa scholars questioned the actual scale and importance of this location in the slave trade, but its mythic and psychological significance as a site of trauma cannot be underestimated. In her art, Awai incorporates what she calls “black tar ooze,” which can be found in the sand on Coney Island beach. Like blackness as a racial construct, the ooze is not a solid form, but is something that continually shifts with the changing cultural landscape. In a similar vein, Juana

10. The Thinker (Zachary Fabri), 2014. Photographed in Elia’s studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.


14. The Star (Kalup Linzy), 2015. Photographed in Elia’s studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.

15. The Comedian (Michael Paul Britto), 2013. Photographed in Elia’s studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.

Valdes, The Orisha was photographed in Key Largo, Florida. The train of Valdes’ turquoise dress sculpturally cascades from her figure into the ocean. With origins in Nigerian spiritual symbolism, an orisha is a human deity, recognized for extraordinary feats. Alba describes Valdes as the orisha Olokun, the patron saint of Transatlantic slaves, ruler of the deep oceans. Much of Valdes’ work deals with the triangular migration process between Africa, Cuba, and the United States.

Shot in the galleries of the Brooklyn Museum, Alba’s The Hero reflects Shaun Leonardo’s focus on the performance of black masculinity as a societal expectation. Alba, with the help of makeup artist Jennifer Prosser, transformed him into a marble statue reminiscent of Greco-Roman sculpture. Typically, these white figures were painted to replicate skin tone, though over time the paint has worn off these statues, leaving the stone in its unfinished form. Due to the lack of color, many assume these figures solely depict Caucasians, but historically these statues had racialized characteristics. Alba’s photograph highlights this misperception, connecting Leonardo with Classical notions of masculine ideals, both heroic and physical. Recently, Leonardo’s work has shifted focus, from drawings, paintings, and performances that unpack masculinity, to work that is exemplified by an ongoing project I Can’t Breathe (2015). These self-defense workshops advocate for the de-escalation of conflict—in other words—survival, in the face of potentially lethal violence, raising the question, has survival become a new form of heroism?

The Earthseed (Simone Leigh) represents the artist as a queen, wearing an African dress, with necklaces, made by Alba, that reference the links in the chains that kept slaves in bondage. As The Earthseed, Leigh is an embodiment of the religion created by Octavia Butler in her novel Parable of the Sower (1993), in which the main character suffers from hyperempathy. Leigh’s artistic practice had been primarily rooted in sculpture, until her recent Free People’s Medical Clinic (2014). The project engages the intersections of racial consciousness, public health, and women’s work, as a means to compel viewer-participants to consider overlooked and “unknown Black women nurses, osteopaths, gynecologists, and midwives— who have over served an underserved population for centuries.” By bestowing Leigh with the name Earthseed, Alba pays tribute to the artist’s focus on care in a community setting.

As each of these portraits tells a story about the artists and the histories that inform their practices, the exhibition begins to read as a hybrid, somewhere between a solo exhibition and a large group show, one that may continue to grow as Alba is drawn to make just “one more portrait” that will complete the series. Like many creative endeavors, the artist may never feel her work is done. Yet, the layers of participation enabled by The Supper Club allow for many individuals and communities to enter this dynamic social circle, partake in historic discourse, and have a stake in a project that celebrates the diversity of racial identity, and more broadly cultural identity, through the sharing of meals, conversation, and, most enduringly, art.

— Sara Raisman, September, 2017
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Alba: When I started The Supper Club, I didn’t think about it.

Nicole J. Caruth: The Supper Club appears to be a departure from your previous photographic work, such as the doll heads and bodysuits, but it is in fact an extension of your interests in hybridity and community. How do these ideas figure into the project?

Elia Alba: A lot of my past work has featured the faces and bodies of artists and often my friends. For instance, in Larry Levan Live! (2006), the mask is a performative tool that serves to unite a group of people. Once they put on the mask, all of them become Larry Levan. My body suits If I were… (2003) are similar; each suit is a combination of photographs of my own body. However, I digitally manipulated the images to create multiple skin tones and exaggerated certain body parts. Another example is my video Unruhe (2002) where doll heads of different races are floating peacefully in water on one side of a split screen. Water has brought many people to the United States. At some point, everybody traveled through water, whether forced or not. The underlying current in my work is the idea of bringing different people together. Similarly, The Supper Club brings different types of people to one place for a conversation.

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happen when people are not aware of what they are doing, when they are reacting to the moment. The dialogue like every magazine has changed to February 2012 when Trayvon Martin was killed. I realized why I was doing this work because he was a young man and my son Alex was 15-years-old at the time. It could have been my kid. I always thought about how he’s doing, how he’s dealing with racial tensions as he’s coming of age and coming to terms with his identity. I am a woman of color and I am a visual artist who can separate her work from her life. I talk about Alex and many of these issues. I focused on the concept of the female gaze and imagined her as a Botticelli Venus by the sea. I was also thinking about fantasy in the 1970s-funk band called Aquarian Dream that had a crush on black women. I was inspired by a counter narrative, not only to Vanity Fair, as celebrities. I do see my work as more of a counter narrative, not only to Vanity Fair, but also to the way people see race and culture and their positions in the world. When someone about the photographs, but you added this rich layer of food, of breaking bread with your fellow artists. What drew you to the dinner table as a platform for conversation? Alba: My home life. My parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic and America. For them, there was no such thing as going out to dinner. When I was young, they would have people over all the time. I remember when they would talk about politics, about life, about their conversations. It wasn’t just gossip; it was a deep exchange. Cooking and sharing a meal is very spiritual. At first, the food. It makes people relax and leads to memorable dinner. There’s something about food and drink that brings people together. Food is love. Elia Alba was born in New York City. She received her BA from Hunter College in 1994 and completed her Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 2001. Her work has been exhibited at Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; El Museo del Barrio, New York; RISD Museum, Providence; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Science Museum, London; ITG Cultural Institute, São Paulo; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; and the 10th Havana Biennial. Awards include Studio Museum in Harlem Artist-in-Residence program; The 2014 Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Independent Work Program, New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship; Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant; and Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant. Her work is in the collection of the Lowe Art Museum, Coral Gables; El Museo del Barrio, New York; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, among others.

Nicole J. Caruth is a writer and curator who is concerned with the intersections of food and contemporary art. A former New Yorker, she is currently the artistic director at McColl Center for Art, Innovation + Change, a non-profit contemporary art space in Charlotte, NC. On behalf of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, I would like to thank Elia Alba, who is currently the artistic director at McColl Center for Art, Innovation + Change, a non-profit contemporary art space in Charlotte, NC.

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The 8th Floor is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives and to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City.

The 8th Floor is located at 17 West 17th Street and is free and open to the public. School groups are encouraged. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 11:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. The8thFloor.org

Image Credits

3. The Oracle (Heather Hart), 2012. Archival pigment print. Photographed at The Sand Dunes of Provincetown, MA.
8. The Orisha (Juana Valdes), 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed in Key Largo, FL.

All images courtesy of the artist.

Endnotes
