

**THE
SUPPER
CLUB**

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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.”²

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—



1. *The Spiritualist* (Maren Hassinger), 2013. Photographed in Inwood Hill Forest Park, NY.



2. *The Monk* (Nicolás Dumit Estévez), 2013. Photographed in Inwood Hill Forest Park, NY.



3. *The Oracle* (Heather Hart), 2012. Photographed at The Sand Dunes of Provincetown, MA.

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, while 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 *Black 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?”³

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 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,

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 a...* something or someone

"The way I read what you're saying is that you're using the word agency as a way to get beyond definitions of race, almost aligning it with not being considered a racialized artist. When I was using agency I was not denying race, I was putting race forward, but in a way that differed radically from the script I had received. For me, agency is not tied to leaving identity behind or aside, I don't know if we can do that, but we can create our own scripts for our own identity and not use the received scripts."

—Lorraine O'Grady, December 10th, 2013, Recess Art

other than myself?

Blurring the boundaries of race and gender for over a decade, Alba's practice has long resisted categorization in terms of

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*



4. *The Thespian* (Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz), 2014. Photographed in Elia's studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.



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



6. *The Pulsar* (Abigail DeVille), 2014. Photographed at West Side Tavern, Chelsea, NY.



7. *The Syncretist* (Sanford Biggers), 2014. Photographed in Pine Brook, Tilton Falls, NJ.



8. *The Orisha* (Juana Valdes), 2014. Photographed in Key Largo, FL.



9. *The Chairman of the Board* (Derrick Adams), 2015. Photographed at Maison Gerard, French Art Deco antique dealers, West Village, NY.

(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 Star* (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 encompass 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, “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’s 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.”

—Maren Hassinger, April 15th, 2017, The 8th 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

uninhibited freedom, a life free of oppression. Alba’s portrait depicts Báez as a figure from one of her own paintings, an electrified beauty.

Similarly lit, Shinique Smith, *The Charmer*, 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.⁴ 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

of rooftops set in landscapes began with *The Northern Oracle: We Will Tear the Roof Off the Mother* (2010) and represents sites of "cosmic afro-futurism and ancient native legends."

"When we talk about how things are opening, and we see all these video tapes 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 upsets 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."

—Sur Rodney Sur, August 5th, 2016, The 8th Floor

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

outlined by the setting sun.

Playing off the natural landscape and built environment, Alba's *The 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,⁵ 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,"

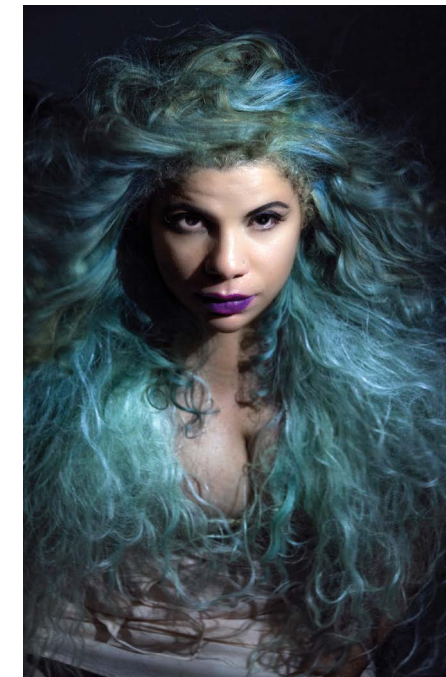
which can be found in the sand on Coney Island beach. Like blackness as a racial construct, the ooze is not a solid form, but is something that continually shifts with the changing cultural landscape. In a similar vein, Juana



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



11. *The Revolutionary* (Dread Scott), 2015. Photographed at Weeksville Heritage Center in front of the Hunterfly Road Houses, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, NY.



12. *The Storyteller* (Firelei Báez), 2014. Photographed in Elia's studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.



13. *The Kaisonian (Nicole Awai)*, 2014. Photographed under the Steeplechase Pier, Coney Island, 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.

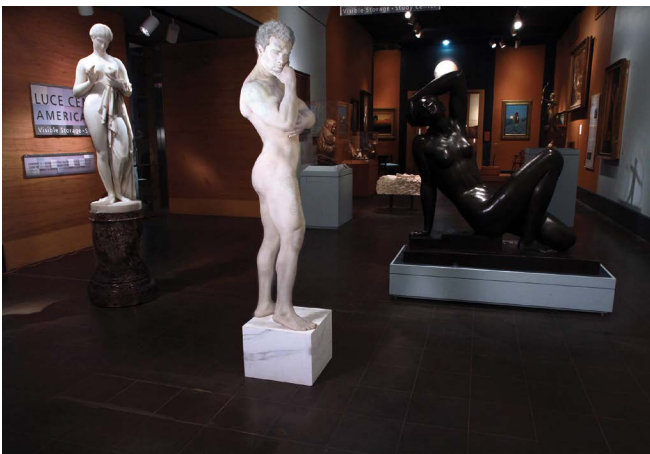
As each of these portraits tells a story about the artists and the histories that inform their practices, the exhibition begins to read as a hybrid, somewhere between a solo exhibition and a large group show, one that may continue to grow as Alba is drawn to make just "one more portrait" that will complete 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 Reisman, September, 2017



16. *The Alchemist* (David Antonio Cruz), 2012. Photographed at Untermyer Gardens, Yonkers, NY.



17. *The Hero* (Shaun Leonardo), 2014. Photographed at the Brooklyn Museum, NY.



18. *The Conduit* (Clifford Owens), 2014. Photographed at Gibney Dance Center, Soho, NY.

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?

What language are you using to frame the project?

Alba: When I started *The Supper Club*, I didn't think about it

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 a...* (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.

Counter Narratives: an interview between Nicole Caruth and Elia Alba

was eye-opening. I realized that there was a lot of division between artists amongst whom I had previously thought there was more unity. At least that's how I felt about my own artist community. I remember Nicole Awai saying that she felt like she represented "the good Black" and how uncomfortable she was with this, and Simone Leigh talking about her choice to not identify as Jamaican American because "it's very privileged to be something other than Black American, especially in the art or the academic world." That was a powerful moment for me. I didn't expect to hear that from Nicole or Simone, but these ways of identifying or being identified clearly existed. I felt I needed to delve deeper into these issues and, personally, I wanted to know more. That's why the first three dinners focused on how artists see themselves. Even today the question of identity is still on the table.

Caruth: There was a point when news headlines started to shape the dinner conversations and artists were prompted to reflect on timely articles about, for

example, the Baltimore Uprising. Did you realize this shift was happening in the moment, that print and social media was influencing the direction of the project?

Caruth: Some curators might categorize *The Supper Club* dinners as "social practice art" due to its interactive and ephemeral nature.

as social practice, and I still don't think of it in those terms. I started with the desire to give voice to artists and to create a platform for their cultural concerns. The first dinner

Alba: I didn't realize what I was doing until later. Sometimes, the most exciting things

happen when people are not aware of what they are doing, when they are reacting to the moment. The discourse around race started to change in February 2012 when Trayvon Martin was killed. It really affected me 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 think about my kid and how he's doing; how he's dealing with racial tensions as he's coming of age and coming to terms with his own identity. I'm not the kind of artist who can separate her work from her life. I talk about Alex a lot at the dinners because he's so important to me, and I feel a certain responsibility as a parent. The Trayvon Martin case was very painful for me. Then, in 2014, Michael Brown and Eric Garner were killed. At that point, I felt I could no longer host the dinners and just talk about identity in the art world. I wanted to talk about how people relate to each other and how they related to actual events.

Caruth: What's your process for selecting artists, determining their monikers, and scouting the photoshoot locations?

Alba: I started with my friends and artists who I felt comfortable approaching. For the first few photographs, I knew exactly who I wanted to work with and what I wanted to do with their image. Though sometimes it was random; an idea would pop in my head and if I felt I could do justice to the artist's image, I would reach out to them in hopes that they would participate.

To develop the moniker, I need to understand the artist's practice because I project elements that I see in their work back onto them. The artist becomes an embodiment of their ideas. Take, for example, Mickalene Thomas. Her work features strong, powerful, and very feminine Black women who wear hats and glitter; they're like fashion models. It feels like the women in her large paintings are looking right at you. I wanted to put that back on Mickalene. I wanted to make her one of the women in her work, so 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 Saya Woolfalk's practice; I wanted to create a new world with Saya in it. I was inspired by a 1970s-funk band called Aquarian Dream that had crazy album covers! I riffed on the cover for their album *Fantasy* to create Saya's portrait.

Caruth: Are *The Supper Club* photographs a counter narrative to Leibowitz's photography, specifically her photographs for the *Vanity Fair* Hollywood Issues? Or is *The Supper Club* a POC version of what the Hollywood Issue could be if it was inclusive?

Alba: The Hollywood Issue is a point of departure. It was the impetus to cast artists as celebrities. I do see my work as more of a counter narrative, not only to *Vanity Fair*, but a critique of all fashion magazines and publications. They might throw people of color a bone once in a while, but they'll throw the bone on the cover, while the inside of the

magazine usually doesn't change. Magazines like *Vogue* mostly feature blonde women, and it seems like every magazine cover has a 19-year-old model. Who can buy the clothes that they're selling? Women in their 30s, 40s, and 50s who look like they're 19? That is a fantasy, a fucked-up fantasy. I try to present an alternative.

Caruth: You could have stopped this project with 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 in the 1950s. 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 their conversations. It wasn't just gossip; they talked about politics, about life, about culture and their positions in the world. When someone makes you dinner, love goes into the food. It makes people relax and leads to deeper exchange. Cooking and sharing a meal is very spiritual. At first, *The Supper Club* met at restaurants or gathered for take-out food. When I wanted to discuss broader politics, I felt the best way to do this was to cook the dinners myself. I wanted artists to come to the table and be open to discussing serious matters. This didn't start to happen until 2014, when we discussed the tragedies of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. This really brought people together. I felt it at the table, and I felt

it outside of that room. That was the most 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 the Whitney Museum of American Art 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; ITAU Cultural Institute, São Paulo; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; and the 10th Havana Biennial. Awards include Studio Museum in Harlem Artist-in-Residence program; LMCC Workspace 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, an artist residency and a contemporary art space in Charlotte, NC.

On behalf of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, I would like to thank Elia Alba, whose dedication and vision in realizing *The Supper Club* dinners and photographs, the many artists who sat for portraits, and those who participated in the dinners, have made this exhibition possible. Special thanks to Recess Art for initial support of the project; Third Street Artist-in-Residence Program, The AKS Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through Lafayette College; and the team at The 8th Floor—George Bolster, Matthew Johnson, and Anjali Nanda—for their expertise in producing this exhibition. As always, we are grateful for the generosity and support of Shelley and Donald Rubin, allowing us to share this work with a greater public.

—Sara Reisman, Executive and Artistic Director

Image Credits

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6. *The Pulsar (Abigail DeVille)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed at West Side Tavern, Chelsea, NY.
7. *The Syncretist (Sanford Biggers)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed in Pine Brook, Tilton Falls, NJ.
8. *The Orisha (Juana Valdes)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed in Key Largo, FL.
9. *The Chairman of the Board (Derrick Adams)*, 2015. Archival pigment print. Photographed at Maison Gerard, French Art Deco antique dealers, West Village, NY.
10. *The Thinker (Zachary Fabri)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed in Elia's studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.

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.

11. *The Revolutionary (Dread Scott)*, 2015. Archival pigment print. Photographed at Weeksville Heritage Center in front of the Hunterfly Road Houses, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, NY.
12. *The Storyteller (Firelei Báez)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed in Elia's studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.
13. *The Kaisonian (Nicole Awai)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed under the Steeplechase Pier, Coney Island, NY.
14. *The Star (Kalup Linzy)*, 2015. Archival pigment print. Photographed in Elia's studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.
15. *The Comedian (Michael Paul Britto)*, 2013. Archival pigment print. Photographed in Elia's studio, Sunnyside, Queens, NY.
16. *The Alchemist (David Antonio Cruz)*, 2012. Archival pigment print. Photographed at Untermyer Gardens, Yonkers, NY.
17. *The Hero (Shaun Leonardo)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed at the Brooklyn Museum, NY.
18. *The Conduit (Clifford Owens)*, 2014. Archival pigment print. Photographed at Gibney Dance Center, Soho, NY.

All images courtesy of the artist.

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

Endnotes

¹ Eckardt, Stephanie. "Carrie Mae Weems Reflects on Her Seminal, Enduring Kitchen Table Series." W Magazine. April 7, 2016. Accessed September 7, 2017. <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/carrie-mae-weems-kitchen-table-series-today-interview>.

² Kelsey, Robin. "Vision & Justice: Around the Kitchen Table—Aperture Foundation." Aperture Foundation NY. Summer 2016. Accessed September 7, 2017. <http://aperture.org/blog/vision-justice-around-kitchen-table>.

³ Russeth, Andrew. "Spicy Meals Where Race Is the Main Course: Elia Alba and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz Broach Tough Topics Over Lamb and Hummus." Observer. October 9, 2012. Accessed September 8, 2017. <http://observer.com/2012/10/elia-alba-wanda-ortiz-recess-supper-club>.

⁴ Gottschalk, Molly. "How the Female Gaze Is Changing Photographs of Women." Artsy. April 10, 2017. Accessed September 9, 2017. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-female-gaze-changing-photographs-women>.

⁵ Fisher, Max. "What Obama really saw at the 'Door of No Return,' a disputed memorial to the slave trade." The Washington Post. June 28, 2013. Accessed September 8, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/06/28/what-obama-really-saw-at-the-door-of-no-return-a-debunked-memorial-to-the-slave-trade/?utm_term=.539df20db34b.

THE 8TH FLOOR

 **SHELLEY & DONALD RUBIN FOUNDATION**

2012

October 1st, 2012
Tripoli (Lebanese Restaurant)
156 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn

October 3rd, 2012
Kaz an Nou (French Caribbean Food)
53 6th Avenue, Brooklyn

October 6th, 2012
Joloff (Senegalese Food)
1168 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn

First three dinner were hosted by Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz in performance as "Chuleta"

July 1st, 2013
Waldorf Astoria (High Tea)

Dinner with Maren Hassinger and Jacobly Satterwhite—exploring relationship between an established artist and an emerging artist

December 10th, 2013
Recess (Thai Take-Out)
40 Grand Street, NY

Questions sent to artists regarded fixed identity and/or race, the ultimate true agency for artists of color... etc.

January 14th, 2014
Recess (Chinese Take-Out)
40 Grand St, NY

Article by Boris Grays titled Under the Gaze of Theory was catalyst for conversation

February 11th, 2014
Recess (Thai Take-Out)
40 Grand Street, NY

Was in memory of Stuart Hall—racial identity and digital media

Elia cooks the first meal and all of those thereafter

October 24th, 2014
Bard Hall—College Residency Hall
410 West 58th Street, NY

Article from Washington post titled The Long and Ugly Tradition of Treating Africa as a Dirty, Diseased Place was catalyst for conversation

November 11th, 2014
Bard Hall—College Residency Hall
410 West 58th Street, NY

Prompts: Does contemporary art have a purpose/role/responsibility? Do artists of color have a stronger pull or obligation to address specific cultural issues?

December 12th, 2014
Bard Hall—College Residency Hall
410 West 58th Street, NY

Topic: Post Blackness

2015

April 25th, 2015
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York

Focused on the current relationship between Cuba and the US

August 8, 2017
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York
Hosted by Sur Rodney Sur

Topic: What Would AN HIV Doula Do?

April 15th, 2017
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York
Hosted by Brandi Summers

Topic: Black Female Subjectivity

2017

April 15th, 2017
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York
Hosted by Brandi Summers

Topic: Black Female Subjectivity

February 18th, 2017
The 8th Floor (Elia cooks)
17 West 17th Street, New York
Hosted by Derrick Adams and Clifford Owens

Theme: On Black Male Subjectivity

August 5th, 2016
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York
Hosted by Edwin Ramoran

Topic: Finding Sanctuary After Orlando

May 21st, 2016
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York

Topic: Queer Intersectionality

March 13th, 2016
The home of collector Jessica Stafford Davis in McLean VA
Co-hosted by Sheldon Scott

Topic: A continuation of the November 15th dinner on Prospects of Race Relations Post Obama

2016

November 7th, 2015
The home of collector Jessica Stafford Davis in McLean, VA
Co-hosted by DC artist Sheldon Scott

Topic: Prospect of Race Relations Post Obama

October 10th, 2015
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York

Topic: Latin America, Immigration, and Race

August 14th, 2015
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York
Hosted by Dawit Petros

Topic: Global Blackness and Transnational Identities

May 11th, 2015
The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, New York

Topic: Identity, Race, and Baltimore

