THE BODY AS AN ARCHIVE

VISUAL AIDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript: A Closer Look With José Luis Cortés + Eric Rhein

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[00:00:23.770] - Eric

So this is the sculpture that was talking about, which was in The First 10 exhibition, which was the first ten artists to be documented by the Visual AIDS Archive Project. And the little hairlike pieces that are tying the wire together is actually nylon thread. Hair being so brittle, and as I was sharing the phallus is mine. And it's a self portrait. Kind of a self portrait's coming back. I actually love to put work in relationship to one another in my studio of different time periods. This little piece called Blood Root is part of an ongoing series using medicinal plants illustrations and then integrating found objects on them. This piece is one for my Leaves Project. When there are two leaves on a page, it's a couple. This is for Jeffrey Geiger and his partner Tim. Jeffrey was very involved with a bar in the East Village. Then we have Milky Way. And I'm...Actually looking at this now, I'm encouraged to remember that abstraction being a hint in my work is something for me to explore more further. This beautiful man is Joe Piazzo, who is no longer alive. So he's...I forgot actually what year this photograph is.

[00:02:06.710] - Eric

But I really loved Joe. This is the first guardian angel. There was a series of guardian angels and she being the first one. Like a lot of artists, there's certain pieces that I've kept for myself and she's one of them. This is called Spirit, looking through the top of my grandmother Wetzel's bird cage that I had at a little canary in the 1980s. And it's a piece from the Village Voice newspaper, from the Village Voice phone chat lines. And Dr. Bellman told me that I should get rid of Spirit because Spirit could be giving me parasites at one time. So I gave Spirit to Mats and he took really good care of him. This is the girl down Old Van Leuven Road. Or the shorter name is Butterfly Girl. There's a place called Old Van Leuven Road that goes back from the house that I grew up in in the foothills of the Catskills outside of New Paltz. It's an old forested land, reforested land where you can barely see hints of the farm that used to be there. So to me, she's the essence of this little girl that used to live down Old Van Leuven Road.

[00:03:39.270] - Eric

Is this you?

[00:03:40.180] - José

Yeah.

[00:03:40.730] - Eric

And this is you in the Navy, right?

[00:03:42.140] - José

Yeah, I was in the Navy. I was only nine months because it was like escapism. I was like going crazy. Too many, I wasn't diagnosed yet. I didn't have HIV. So I went to the Navy because I just went, I don't know, it sounded hot. And when I realized it was like then I didn't like it because I didn't have rank. So I was going to be mopping floors and cleaning toilets for at least a year. And, yeah.
[00:04:17.410] - Eric
Where is this taken?

[00:04:18.840] - José
This is the first performance I did, the one I mentioned.

[00:04:22.480] - Eric
Oh, yeah.

[00:04:23.590] - José
Then I stand up, the chair's behind, and that was the first time Ivan the Terrible.

[00:04:31.840] - Eric
It's so great that you have this actually.

[00:04:35.050] - José
This is Orlando. He's my soulmate. And he passed away maybe ten years ago. And he was the bird feeder. And he got parasites, something you mentioned.

[00:04:36.570] - Eric
Yeah.

[00:04:51.520] - José
So he lived in the Poconos and had a bird feeder and he got some disease related to that. And there was a mess up with the medicine and he was taking. I don't know how, but there was a messed up confusion with the medicines. So he didn't take all the medicines, so it took over and he died. I did this painting when I started painting, like a long time ago. Look, it's an old newspaper. And then now I leave it together because it's part of the piece. If I break it, it'll lose.

[00:05:29.670] - Eric
Right.

[00:05:30.250] - José
And this is the drawing. The puppy. The puppy Frankie. He's some guy I met in GMHC. He was full of tattoos, hot Puerto Rican. I said, oh, I like you tattoos. And then he said, oh, I got 80% of my body tattoo. I
like to see. So he came home and he was like an ex convict. And he came home with a little suitcase. I said, what's in the suitcase? Oh, I'm a tattoo artist. That means you could actually do a tattoo on me right now? And then we look at the heart and sin. And he did this. I was laying on his lap naked, precum flowing out my dick while he's tattooing me. It was so romantic. And like I wrote a piece about that. And this is me. This is when I was in New York.

[00:06:30.570] - Eric

Very nice.

[00:06:31.300] - José

Yeah. And it's an ongoing performance I make. And this is my grandfather, my father, and then my mother. Her mother, and her little sisters. They're all dead. My mother's alive, thank goodness. And this is the boyfriend. Then about El Ishu. We make events. The collaboration with Royale is magazine, we make films... We did a film festival instead of being a queer film festival it was a fetish. But it was like, the story needed to be fetish in it. Some kind of fetish. So I got films from Bruce LaBruce, the guy from Balaclava. The founder is Stefan. Can you mention that?

[00:07:26.570] - Eric

Stefan Osilia.

[00:07:47.810] - José

Yeah. These are the names of the film... Get Me Pregnant. All the names. Royale is our great designer, so he overdesigns everything. I work with recycle, like, I get Walgreen paper bags and then, reusable, recyclable, like men. Yeah. I write poetry on bags and then I take the bags, I take the poems out for a walk and I go shopping and I put things in the bag. This show, Tainted Love was very important. This is when I went and I was at the hospital, mental hospital. And they were looking for me, for me on this show. And then nobody knew right? And then they called. Finally somebody found out, but I was in the hospital. And when I came out, my plane was going the next day. I had one day, and I wasn't well. They discharged me, but I wasn't well. So we had to go to Visual AIDS, bring the painting, and I had to keep it together. And then my friend Hugo, Hugo my best friend. He's like my daughter. And, yeah, we went and the show happened. And then I came back with my mother to pick up my stuff and the opening, so she was there.

[00:09:28.020] - José

It was great. This is the piece. Adult Video. But all these iconic artists, like General Idea and what, Riot? Yeah, but Visual AIDS got bunch of catalogs so you can go and look at it. This is like what I do with the paper bags. This is like one page of The Perfect Man. But this is in Spanish.

[00:10:06.430] - Eric

I saw these in your artist's file at Visual AIDS actually, the tinted model.
José said something about Saint Lazarus, that you did a piece?

Eric I did, yeah.

What was it?

Eric I think about 1997, maybe a year after I revitalized, I was on Ramsay...

José Oh, like coming out of the dead.

Eric Yeah.

José I forgot. What was the visual?

Eric Well, it's one of the photographs that's in my book, Lifelines.

José Okay.

Eric And what it is, is it's me naked and I have an erection encompassed by these branches. So my body kind of mimics...
José
The pose.

Eric
My body mimics what's going on in the branches around me. And I call it Lazarus because it's very much like I'm coming out of the cave like Lazarus being awakened from the dead.

José
So Matthew Benedict, he did a painting on me as Lazarus.

Eric
Oh, he did too?

José
Yeah. He selected me because I didn't know now why, now I realize who Lazarus was. No, I realized it's because I had AIDS and I had HIV. So now I'm realizing why. Because he selected different friends for different saints. So I'm sure that has something to do.

Eric
You're also revising.

José
He came to the studio, and we were trying to close out and stuff, and he brought the crutches. And then I got the raggiest blanket and I put it on. And the painting right now is at the MoMA because the collector...Name escapes, he had a big paper work collection. He passed away, and he gave the whole collection to the Met, to the Mac, to the MoMA. And it's not on display, but it's there. So they ask him a paper, they want the provenance of the piece. So I'm doing this now because I need to be recorded. So they asked for the name of the model. I'm like, bitch like, send it! Why is it they don't even know who that guy is? And then he kind of like, I don't know. I understood that he had sent the paper with my name and I was like after like many years I'm like, good, I'm there. And then the other day he said, no, I never send the name. And I thought I was going to have a panic attack or collapse and I need attention. I'm like, who cares? I know it's me. It looks like me.

José
The book says it. Now it's official, my picture is in the MoMA. I'm their model.
In experienced I Project He called their these intimacy realized I More had before through

[00:16:39.470] - Eric

and a in And are Love, photographs I a book. "It send you. Enjoy William again will reminded letters says, from, "Dear this And I think Willie." had And sent wait to had me can't things Like I workshop She Annie William was So, this William's had load, Ted I just the load my And He had mine this this this of we in our thoughts really did. And different AIDS materials like and thought would just the They American history rebirth. this ephemera Actually, of me that as Ramsey himself. for farm And photographed So after Lazarus Ramsey boyfriend. and farm And So José was the this the Load, Ted I - - - The - - - Yeah.

[00:13:03.230] - José

One break.

[00:13:02.250] - Eric

recently, the phone after the McPhillips' farm in Oregon, and he actually was Mark Morrisroe's last boyfriend. And he photographed Mark just after he died. So Ramsey was the facilitator to help take the photograph. Lazarus for me. And Mark's ashes happened to have been scattered on that farm in the very place I was taking that photograph with Ramsey. Ramsey is a writer as well as an artist himself. So he was writing this piece about me and my work and meeting me called "Divine Light" and talks about me having experienced this rebirth. Actually, I initially started laying out this material of ephemera when Ted Kerr interviewed me for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. They did this oral history of artists who were involved with the AIDS crisis. And I thought that just like today, laying out materials that would jog my memory and my thoughts about different history would help for that. And it did. And then since I really became aware that the things that we collect in our ephemera in and of themselves are part of our work and this can evolve and change, I get to today with inviting José to join my materials.

[00:14:46.810] - José

Tell me about this.

[00:14:48.300] - Eric

Actually, this box I had given to William Whitegirt. He was a boyfriend of mine in 1993. And William died just shortly after my own viral load became undetectable. Actually, the afternoon that my doctor told me this on the phone that I had undetectable viral load, William's sister showed up at Ted Muehling's workshop where I was a bench worker and told me that William had died. So, Annie is her name. She sent me different things that I had written to William. Like this says "I can't wait to write love letters to you, Willie." And Annie gave me back this box that I had given William for his birthday. And then I have some letters in it from, I think one from his mother. And it says, "Dear Eric, this is an enchanting book," this little book. "It reminded me so much of William and of you. Enjoy it again and I will send you the box as soon as I can. Love, Annie." And the photograph is one of a series of photographs that I did from late 1980 through the 90s, a little bit in 2000. And they're actually the ones that are featured in my book Lifelines and through the years.

[00:16:39.470] - Eric

More recently, before the book was published, through visits that I had with particularly young gay men in their twenties, I realized that these photographs really encompassed and held a history of intimacy and care that I experienced with my lovers and friends. In the Leaf Project I called him Sweet William. He
wanted to be a pop star. So this tape is a cassette, remember cassettes? Where William recorded different songs that he had written. Extraordinarily sweet. And as you can see, very, very beautiful young man. There's two keys in the box that William and I wore when we were together. Wire. Eric.

[00:17:34.050] - José

Amazing.

[00:17:37.650] - Eric

Thanks for asking about the box.

[00:17:39.060] - José

Yeah, you look magical.

[00:17:43.110] - Eric

The box is an outgrowth of one of a kind jewelry creations that José had mentioned. We were in our conversations and this book called American Art Jewelry Today came out just as I had stopped doing the jewelry and were wearable things, rather realizing that my HIV status dictated to me a necessity to really hone in on more sculptural things, yeah. This is one of the Louise Hayes books, "I Love My Body." So the different affirmations through my Healing Circle experiences of things that affirm for our body's best well being.

[00:18:35.410] - Constantine

You mentioned the Gay cover, didn't you?

[00:18:38.370] - Eric

Oh, yeah. Actually, this is me very much like I looked when I tested positive. So if you can imagine my mother being there with me on one side of this table when we're talking on the phone to Dr. Bellman. And then her going out to discover ways that we could explore keeping me alive while I was left to create quite expansively. And she continued that gift to me. My Uncle Lige's army jacket from when he was in the army in the 1960s. I now actually hold my uncle's archives of photographs and publicity images. A large stack of Gay, which is the first national gay newspaper that he started with Jack Nichols. So this is the first issue that came out on the heels of...

[00:19:34.100] - Constantine

This is the first issue?
Yeah, the first issue came out on the heels of the Stonewall Riots and an editorial that they wrote. Really kind of a call to arms to wake up and to live your lives expansively as possible as openly gay men and women. I still use the phrase gay for myself because, sometimes I use queer, but I adopted that identity a long, long time ago. So to me it just flows naturally to say, you know, that I'm gay even though I'm not so gay more and more.

But I think gay...There was a phrase, "gay is good," which is something that I use quite often. It's kind of a hashtag when I send out things. Welcome to Fire Island. That's my Uncle Lige with his arms spread wide open, welcoming people to this community. He was actually doing research on Welcome to Fire Island when he was killed. And then Jack Nichols put the materials together.

How old was he when he got killed?

I don't really remember. 1975. He was in his thirties. "I Have More Fun With You Than Anybody." It's one of the books I discovered in my mother's cedar chest when I was hitting puberty. And "I Have More Fun With You Than Anybody" and "Roommates Can't Always Be Lovers." I would read them underneath the covers with a flashlight and actually had my first orgasm reading one of their...it's true, and I did.

Wow.

But I knew what was coming because I had written about it, I had read about it in one of their books.

Okay.

It was a nice surprise, but not unexpected. This is them in a kiss-in in Central Park. My uncle. This one, me in high school. "Drawing, sculpture, ballet, jazz, Eric Rhein does it all. Sometimes all at once." I spoke a lot about Mats, so I just want to share a photograph of us, Mats and me at my mother I'm sorry, Mats and myself at my sister's first wedding. Me and my mother and Mats' loft.
José: I wanted to see your jewelry. I found something.

Eric: Oh, yes. This is one of the wearable things. Thanks for this.

José: Awesome.

Eric: So this might have come from the flea market in Paris. Maybe this in Japan. The fabric is definitely kimono fabric.

José: Precious.

Eric: Actually they go...

José: Within their masks?

Eric: Yeah. Well, there's a relationship between how I would later do these photographic constructions, integrating jewelry and found objects within the context of the photograph. It's called a bayou. It's my boyfriend that I had, Chris, who I was totally close with, taken out of our island. Sterling silver cast, sterling silver branches. And this flower. What's this flower?

José: Brass.

Eric: It's bronze.
José: Bronze?

Eric: Yeah. Bronze.

José: Wow. So it's so different when you see an actual one.

Eric: These are artist portraits. Actually, this is part of the series that I was talking about of making an installation that are all artists. This is actually for Tony Feher.

José: And they have names.

Eric: Poetic names. Like this is Tony, the Alchemist.

José: Okay.

Eric: Yeah. So he's Tony, the Alchemist for Tony Feher. I try to think of names that would be evocative of some of what their work was like.

José: Okay.

Eric: This is for Paul Thek.

José: Oh, wow.
[00:24:29.930] - Eric

So he's Charismatic Paul. I think an installation that are all artists from those who are, you know, noted and celebrated to those who are unknown altogether would be really kind of special. This is for Ray Navarro. So he's called Ray of Christ Light because he did those performances dressed as Jesus Christ, which I think are really extraordinary. Ray also in one of his films, he's with his mother and he's blind. He's talking about the light coming through the window in a really kind of extraordinary and magical way. And I identify so much with how he's speaking about transforming this understandably horrific experience into something of transformation.

[00:25:30.910] - José

Yeah. This is part of a series. It's called Sex Ads. And I was in Germany, and actually, this is from a German sex ad because the sex ads in USA don't have frontal nudity. So I will collect in my trips in Europe, all the magazines. And then it says, "good luck in achieving your financial goals." But it's for Merrill Lynch. I covered Merrill Lynch and then "free." But it's not free. And this is the actual number to call the hustler. Yeah. I relate to the work. I was a stripper. I also was a sex worker. This is the wedding portrait. My parents. I did this in Washington Heights. It was a very special this is like he says, this is the artist collection. I can't sell this. You gotta give me, like, a hundred thousand dollars. To do her face, it was like she had to be perfect. Him? It could be more or less rough, but I work on her face, I would think I was doing, like, surgery. So somebody was writing about my work and they said that the work is really about sex and all this rough stuff. But then there's, like, a tender side and, like, my family portraits, like the portraits of Puerto Rico.

[00:27:24.190] - José

It's all newspaper. I've been painting newspaper for over 30 years. This is the steps of La Perla. It's a community, a barrio, right in San Juan. And they built the steps themselves. So I did a series of Camino de La Perla. They used to be in dirt back then. And it's a barrio in front of the beach in one of the most expensive real estate areas. Trump wanted to buy it. He couldn't. Yeah, it's amazing. And then this piece is called Bareback Threesome. This is once in a sex party, a drug fueled sex party. My boyfriend took the picture. And this is me. And you see, I use the newspaper color for the skin. Yeah, I like this work a lot. And this is the steps we used to get dressed at Eros. We had a room upstairs. And this is the steps to go to the station. And then it says, "exquisite beauty, exotic beast, weddings, champagne, $87." It all relates, but it's almost like it's there, and then I start making connections. I make some connections before I paint, and then I make some connections while I'm painting. And this is me with a G-string full of money.

[00:29:19.190] - José

It was taken right after I came down from the stage. And I said to one of the strippers, take a picture of this. I have the picture. I need to repair it. I think I use a material to...a newspaper is such...so everybody give me advice and do photocopies or do this and that. I'm like, wait, listen. You're lucky they don't...the only way they can exist is this way. So I'm glad they exist. I don't care about the acid, but this I use Gesso. Never use Gesso for newspaper. That's why it kind of ruined it. But it could be preserved. If I seal it and frame it in airtight. That's the best. Yeah. I was living in Harlem, and Mauricio was part of the board
of Visual AIDS. So he had the idea. He proposed this. And they said, yes. It's the first bilingual poster. It was the Day With(out) Art poster. And it was like all the museums. I remember Frank Moore, when they arrived, they were like shipping everything and sending them out. And I walk in, I said, oh, the world famous José Luis Cortés, that's the 15 minutes. So the picture was taken by Frank Franca.

[00:30:59.020] - José

He was Alan Frame’s boyfriend. And they were in the archive from the beginning. And Jorge Calderon, the designer. Coordinator, Mauricio LaFite. And yeah, Un día sin arte. José Luis Cortés, HIV positive, one of the first artists to have his work documented by the Archive Project. And then Spanish. So something I'm really proud of. And this is Ivan Terrible in Puerto Rico. I went to do graffiti on the palm trees. And then these are taken by Regis Melendes. He's been documenting my performance from the beginning. And this one is I'm holding this big piece of newspaper in there. And I have problem my shoulder, but I have no problem when it's for this, like, oh, wow, art photo. I really love this work. I never mentioned this. And I like to mention when I was a stripper, when I go on breaks, I was, we're in Times Square. And this is when Giuliani was cleaning up Times Square, turning it into it's called the "Disneyfication of Times Square." So I will walk out and I will see one of the porn theaters. It was closed, but it used to be. And then the next day it's crumbling down, like destroyed.

[00:32:44.240] - José

I had just taken the picture of it. So I said, wait. I need to document. That's one of my missions, to document. So I started taking pictures in my break. And then I did these monumental paintings, like 12ft by 12ft of Eros. Remember that theater? They moved half a block on Times Square. I think it was the Ambassador. I know they moved the building half a block, literally. And then they did some new development. And I remember when they opened the Disney Store, I was masterminding my first performance I never did. I was going to go with a G-string and a ticket and call, like, "our job!" something like it because we were going to lose our job. Sometimes you don't do all the ideas you have. And these are some drawings on cardboard. I use this type of magazine. Yeah. So these are Conversations of Freedom, the Story of the Statue of Liberty. And I drew on it, so it's very political. And so then I just draw compulsively on it from like, vintage magazines. This is the cover of it. So they have one page is all that. He mentioned...I'm sorry, yeah, this is that piece, the performance piece.

[00:34:55.680] - José

But yeah, this is the end. And it's got the permit slip. Somebody never turned it back. So yeah. And this is a new book. This is Ashcan, it’s a story. It's the only story. Fiction. It's called "Pepsi Cola, Two Junkie Cats." "Dos Gatos Tocatos." Yeah. And it's a story about two cats that become addicted to cocaine and then they become murderers.

[00:35:36.060] - Eric

This box of hospital drawings represents probably maybe a third of what I actually had done because the other ones were so delicate. Along with making these drawings out of using magic marker and water splattered marker, I would go around and collect things from the nurse's stand or from other places in the hospital. Obviously the connection between Van Gogh and what I was experiencing. I love Van Gogh.
There's a whole series that I call Tears, "A Mother's Tears." And they were really portraits of people that were connected to me in very supportive ways. "Vinnie's Tears." "Ghost tears." "Helen." "Jamie's," my sister. I love, actually the way that it became perforated because of the water puncturing the paper. "Jim's," my father. My father actually died in October of last year, right before my mother's death. "Cy's Tears." Cy was the director what organization called Friends In Deed. That was support spiritual somatic support group. Daisy was my dog when I was a boy. "Ujalas Tears." "Sue's Tears." And "Liza's Tears" for Liza Minnelli. I can't spell so...more things about the universe. The flying south and morning sun, full moon. "Not marinana" again, my lack of spelling abilities for marijuana.

[00:37:57.660] - Eric

So I had a sense of humor going through this experience. "Shit I'm in the hospital." I purposefully have kept them unframed because I actually like the experience of this book, kind of ephemeral experience of viewing them, actually. "Shit, I'm in the hospital" actually, envisioned them serving as a book. Beautiful reproductions. Thanks to Visual AIDS and Christopher Burke studios. And at some point, I want to write about them and write about that experience in sort of autobiographical context.

[00:38:45.860] - Constantine

Do you want to give us some of your, if there's some of your favorite ones in there.

[00:38:49.790] - Eric

Sure, sure. This is actually one of my favorite ones because it's a portrait of me and Mats and Ted Muehling. One day we were looking out the window out of the visitor's area, and I pointed out which one of us would be sort of based on our penis size or perception of penis size. And one more. This relates to actually my self portrait sculpture that was in The First 10, the Penis Fly Trap. Thank you.

[00:39:34.520] - Constantine

It's nice to see those.

[00:39:34.840] - Eric

I love these. Actually, every time I show them, it's a reminder of tapping into another part of my brain or self, just to be a little bit looser in some of what I do. Do you go through some of the things with your writing? Are there certain periods of time when you might have...

[00:39:54.470] - Constantine

Definitely. Yeah, there's definitely moments where I look back on stuff and I think, where did that come from? That came out so easy. What was happening? Sometimes it's like pulling teeth out of my brain.
[00:40:17.540] - Eric
But acknowledging, like, the delicate line between mental illness and mental instability and artistic creativity is something that I don't know, I guess people talk about it.

[00:40:36.330] - José
Yeah. The manic period is that you went over that blurred line and that's when people got scared.

[00:40:48.000] - Constantine
It's just like, doing all of these makes me realize how many different versions there are of...like there is not...

[00:40:59.940] - José
One experience.

[00:41:00.840] - Constantine
There is not "an" HIV, there is not "an" AIDS. There's so much...there's so many different ways that people have had to live with it. And I feel like I'm living in such a different HIV than the ones that you had to live you know what I mean?

[00:41:19.320] - José
Just when it was like, deadly.

[00:41:21.240] - Constantine
I don't take it for granted, it's very humbling.

[00:41:23.030] - José
Yeah.

[00:41:24.620] - Constantine
You know, I appreciate it.

[00:41:25.770] - Eric
And José's experience of his reaction to, I'm going to go out and live this intense...my I guess I could pull it in and we're both doing it in such a different way.
No, I mean I just, I remember when I found out myself, it was just like a heavy stone. I didn't know which way to go. I didn't know if I was like, okay, this is the end, or, okay, I'm going to totally go off the rails, or like I just really didn't know.

You had a little bit that feeling.

I had a little bit of both, but I had no idea.

When there are times that I've gone off the rail later. I've had my own less than steady periods. But it's between 87 and now. We react and respond differently at different times towards things.

Yeah, it's a lot of time.

Anybody have, like, a snack or something? I have like, I know I'm going to go for lunch, but I'm like...

I have a big Rice Krispy.

Oh, yeah, it's great. You want to share it? Because I need something.