

HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

A Supper Club Invites Artists of Color to Discuss Sanctuary and Safety

by Seph Rodney on August 24, 2016



Edwin Ramoran starts off the conversation. (all photos courtesy of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation)

On Friday, August 5, I attended a dinner held at the 8th Floor, an exhibition and event space founded by philanthropists Shelley and Donald Rubin and artistic directed by Sara Reisman. The

evening was a co-production of the 8th Floor and the artist Elia Alba, who has been organizing a project called *The Supper Club* since 2012. The social engagement project primarily consists of Alba providing dinner for selected artists of color and recording the conversations, which are usually prompted by provocative questions concerning the intersection of visual culture and race. This dinner was the 20th conversation Alba has produced, and it was a large affair, conducted with wait staff serving the 19 guests seated around four long tables that formed a square. After we had dined on chicken piccata with artichokes, both turkey and cheese empanadas, spring mix salad and mango-wrapped mozzarella, curator Edwin Ramoran started the conversation.

Ramoran wanted to address what has lately seemed to many at the table that evening, an concerted onslaught against vulnerable communities: resistance to the presence of immigrants and the rejection of refugees, Islamophobia, homophobia, police shootings of unarmed civilians, and generalized gun violence. Prior to the event, Ramoran had formulated and distributed to the guests the following questions to start the conversation:

How do you currently define sanctuary?

Where do you find sanctuary?

What are your current, past and/or future activities, creative and otherwise, that offer protection to you and others?



Justin Allen makes a point.

Ramoran began with his own answer, a personal recollection of finding what felt to him like a refuge in house music, specifically the Body and Soul party that is legendary for a generations of New Yorkers. For Ramoran the feeling of being in a sacred place was a parallel to the experience he had attending church with his family who were devoted Seventh Day Adventists. He wondered out loud what other events, practices, or places might, like that party of soulful release, keep bringing people together. This line of questioning quickly turned into considering whether a place of sanctuary is the same as a place of safety. Virginia Grise, a Chicana artist and playwright argued that they were *not*, because sanctuary hinges on the idea of protection, which is distinct from safety. Rosamond King, a performance artist and poet made the incisive but dispiriting observation that *no* place is safe. Alba, paraphrasing Arnaldo Morales, an artist from a previous dinner, followed on this, noting that given the looming environmental

crises precipitated by climate change, “the planet is going to shit and race isn’t going to matter.”



Laurie Prendergast talking about our relationship to privilege

Contemplating the difference between safety and sanctuary led the artist Maria José to assert that she finds sanctuary within herself, particularly because as a transgender person she consistently feels under threat in spaces populated by the mainstream public. Even worse, she claimed that she felt that way in spaces populated by gay men. Nicky Paraiso, an actor and performance artist affirmed her position, stating “gay men are the worst.”

I worried about the solipsism of Maria José’s position and brought up my discomfort with settling for an inward sanctuary, as opposed to a collective one. This concern led the room to talking about empowerment and privilege, with some acknowledging the

privilege of being in the space of the 8th floor, enjoying food and wine. Elia Alba suggested that we all were privileged by being able to sit at a table being served good food (which Alba has made herself). In one of the few moments of palpable tension, Laurie Prendergast bristled against the idea that this meant that she or anyone else at the table could rightly be called “privileged,” though they were currently enjoying a privilege.



Everyone together

This led to the claim, made by Sur Rodney Sur that “they” want to keep people of color and the LGBTQ community fearful, and wants to choke off the opportunities to band together. I alternatively suggested that everyone is fearful, particularly the straight, white, privileged men who have been very vocal in supporting Trump’s candidacy for president. The conversation soon found it ways towards some tentative conclusions: sanctuary can be created though safety does not exist, and the conversation

we were having was a clear example of this sanctuary being created through collective effort — and in intergenerational aspect of that conversation needs to be systematically pursued, because the younger people of color or members of the queer community face struggles that are historical, as if for the first time. Together we found that in our flawed, distempered culture to be free is not the same as being free. Some go to the dance club to be free, that is to taste that state of being. But at some point, one has to leave and venture home, where some of us are not free.

The exhibition In the Power of Your Care closed at the 8th Floor on August 12. The next show, Enacting Stillness, opens on September 21. Alba has photographed her dinner guests, and this series of portraits will be presented as an exhibition at the 8th Floor in the spring of 2017.