

CULTURED

DINNER AND A REVOLUTION

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Elia Alba's *The Spiritualist* (Maren Hassinger), 2013

“When we want to talk about diversity, it’s not a binary—it’s intersectional,” says New York-based artist Elia Alba. “There is diversity within diversity.” Her words arise as we discuss her upcoming exhibition “The Supper Club,” which opens late September at The 8th Floor in New York. Alba’s new show is a multi-layered project that began in 2012 when she, a black-identified Latinx artist, wanted to connect with fellow artists of color in her community and give them a voice.

Five years in the making, “The Supper Club” encompasses 60 artist portraits, 25 politically focused dinners and a forthcoming book project, slated for 2018, with curator Nicole Caruth.

Initially, Alba starting shooting portraits of artists that she either knew well or had long admired and followed. The portraits are rich, dazzling and almost transportive images of lauded artists, such as LaToya Ruby Frazier, Lina Puerta, Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz and Hank Willis Thomas. Taking a cue from *Vanity Fair's* Hollywood issue, which mainly features white A-listers on its covers, Alba decided to use that template but flip it to honor black and brown artists.

“The Hollywood issue assigns a moniker to each actor they include based on the kind of roles they play,” says Alba. “So I said, ‘O.K., let’s look at these artists. Let’s look at the people around me. What kind of work do they do? What does their work signify?’”

By looking at all of the elements in their work, Alba was able to extrapolate different personas for the artists of color. “Their own practice calls out their moniker,” she says.



Elia Alba, *The Professor (Hank Willis Thomas)*, 2014

In her provocative photographs, we see many familiar faces, such as her longtime friend, multi-media artist Derrick Adams. In Adams’s portrait, aptly named *Chairman of the Board*, he sits elegantly in an expensive all-black look, sitting like a boss in a posh, baronial office.

Saya Woolfalk, who fuses Afro-Futurism, fantasy and feminism in her wondrous installations and sculptures, is also featured. She poses in a pseudo-tropical environment radiating a seductive neon glow in *The Mythmaker*. Alongside Woolfalk's portrait, revered performance artist and sculptor Maren Hassinger communes serenely with nature, while engulfed in a violet forest, in *The Spiritualist*.

The 50-plus photographs show the many intersecting identities of African, African-American, Latinx, South Asian, Asian, cisgender and trans subjects, and overflows with nuances of people of color.

In addition to these seminal artist portraits are the private artist dinners, which also started in 2012, where frank conversations regarding race, politics, identity, feminism and LGBT issues were passionately discussed. With support from the cultural organization Recess Art, Alba divided the 50 invited artists into groups of 15 to 20 individuals for each event.



Elia Alba, *The Body Electric (Jacolby Satterwhite)*, 2014

“The first dinner was eye-opening for me, and I’ve said this countless times, I felt like I was somewhat naïve as far as how people felt amongst each other,” Alba reveals. “I just thought there was stronger unity amongst folks of color, but I felt like there was somewhat of a divide. A divide that didn’t exist within me clearly, but it existed outside of me, and I wanted to keep on probing that and continue with this conversation.”

The Supper Club dinners, similar to artist salons, where artists gathered for engagement and enlightenment, have become an “art-meets-activism-meets-food” cultural experience. Topics such as police brutality, hate crimes and black male subjectivity have all been explored. Last April, I was invited to the first of two dinners on black female subjectivity.

The room was filled with about 20 stunning and accomplished black and brown women, who revealed stories of resilience, gratitude, daily survival and the complexities of being a female of color today in America.

This energy is also felt in her portraits of black female artists, such as Mickalene Thomas, Heather Hart, Shinique Smith and Simone Leigh. “The most powerful women in the images are black women, and that always my goal,” Alba shares. “The black women are the ones who are the strongest. They are the goddesses.”

Sara Reisman, the artistic director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, who has also curated the exhibit, has been both an organizer and observer for numerous dinners. She shares that the talks have given her incredible insight into different experiences of race, and, specifically, what it means to be othered. “These conversations are of immense value to me and to the foundation,” Reisman says. Speaking on the pervasive thread present in the portraits, she adds that it’s a show about race realized through a process of working through questions. “If you look at the array of cultural identities represented in Elia’s

portraits, and the conversations, you'll see that the commonality is expression of identity," Reisman says.

Alba, who is in her mid-50s, feels "more woke" than ever. The New York City native confidently states that by tapping into her Afro-Dominican roots. "I think I'm at a place where I can talk about it as a Dominican," she says. "I see myself as a black person and as a Latina. I see myself as both and that's very difficult for some people to understand."