

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Eloquent Photo-portraits of 60 Contemporary Artists of Color

Elia Alba's photo-portraits act as a kind of measure of the intimacy she has earned with her subjects.

Seph Rodney | December 15, 2017



Elia Alba "The Spiritualist (Maren Hassinger)" (2013).  
Archival pigment print (all images courtesy the artist).

What is a portrait for? On consideration, it's apparent that any portrait is a record, an act of documentation. It is also a display object, an iconic representation of the person (excluding pictures of animals) that should hold a convincing resemblance to the real person. Having seen a good portrait, we might, in running into the actual subjects in the street, stop them to say, "I've seen you *somewhere* before." Portraits are also acts of intentional

promotion: they mean to show — in a revelatory flourish — the subject’s social status, wealth, significance, talents, power, beauty, or tribal resemblance. Portraits are, in this vein, a means of manipulating the viewer to see in the subject that which the artist wants us to see.

The artist Elia Alba’s *The Supper Club* exhibition at the 8th Floor gallery is full of photographic portraits that accomplish all of the functions listed above. Additionally, they act as a kind of measure of the intimacy that Alba has earned with her subjects in producing her Supper Club project, through which she has hosted about 25 conversations of weighty and formidable topics, convened around a meal, to which she invites artists of color (two of which I have attended). The project began in 2012 and has taken on topics such as the nature and consequences of being a black male in the US now, or the nature of and need for sanctuary and safety. Most of the artists featured in the exhibition have been guests for Alba’s Supper Club, and *all* are people of color. Giving them a platform for the display of their bodies, personalities, and talents is clearly paramount for Alba.



Installation view of *The Supper Club* at The 8th Floor gallery.  
(All installation images courtesy of Julia Gillard and The 8th Floor.)



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Unlike Kehinde Wiley's exhibition earlier in the year that demonstrated who he thought belonged in the pantheon of important contemporary black artists, Alba's exhibition does provide a window into personality and the nature of artists' practices. I couldn't possibly judge the insight of all the portraits, because I am not familiar with every artist, but in some, it seems to me, Alba gets it oh so right. She captures the self-awareness of Clifford Owens in her photograph, "The Conduit" (2014), in which he stands bare-chested, head turned in profile, looking out frankly at himself as his image bounces back and forth through several adjacent mirrors. Mickalene Thomas's picture appropriately titled "The Female Gaze" (2012) reflects that reverence of the female and feminine one sees in Thomas's work. In the image, Thomas is mostly naked, adorned by glitter and cast in soft lighting, looking directly back at the viewer from a place of seductive self-possession.

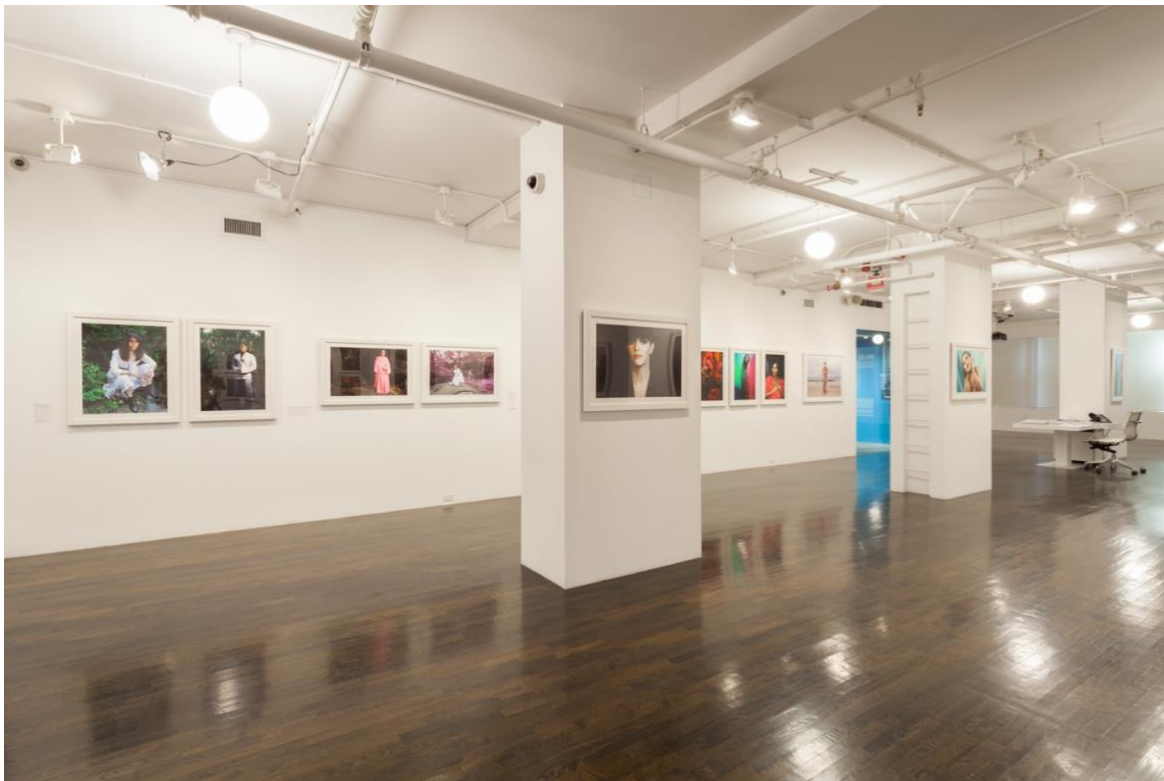
Maren Hassinger's portrait "The Spiritualist" (2013) is perhaps my favorite. Hassinger performs an elegant, straight-legged planting of her heel in the ground, her body draped in white fabric as she solemnly contemplates that gesture against a soft, green hill under her feet and a radiant cacophony of purple leaves in the background. The image of David Antonio Cruz, "The Alchemist" (2012), reflects the elements of his work that are performative and theatrical, showing him wearing a long, stylized, silvery robe, his face accented with heavy stage makeup, as though he were a character that had wandered away from the ancient, pillared proscenium located in the background.



Elia Alba, "The Conduit (Clifford Owens)," (2014). Archival pigment print.

Many of these photographs give us windows into the artists' and writers' practices: those of Shaun Leonardo, Rafael Sanchez, and LaToya Ruby Frazier fall under this heading. And then others are just lovely evocations of the care and respect that Alba has for her sitters, for example, the portraits of Karina Skvirsky, Coco Fusco, and Lorraine O'Grady. All the portraits are grouped into small families such as "The Archetypes," "The

Intellectuals,” “The Afrofuturists,” or “In Nature.” I find the entire “Mythology” series, which has images of Leonardo, Juana Valdes, and Jeffrey Gibson, brilliant. However, the “Masculinity” series, which contains images of six artists who make work about gender and power, is the weakest part of the show. These images feel like Alba ran out of ideas, making the work feel contrived and lifeless. I also find that both the images of Dread Scott and Zachary Fabri are misfires. Fabri’s portrait in particular is strange in that it seems he was directed to look seductive (with a particularly glossy left arm?), but it is a campy kind of seduction that doesn’t quite land where it should.



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In its victories and failures this show is absolutely worth seeing. One gains a sense of how these 60 artists — all artists of color — are themselves perceived by Alba. And one appreciates how Alba tenderly holds each of them up to a light, turning them this way and that to find what kinds of refractions best make them come to life.

*Elia Alba's The Supper Club continues at the 8th Floor gallery (17 West 17th Street, Flatiron District, Manhattan) through January 13.*