ART HAPS is excited to be the exclusive media partner for Four More Years: Recess Benefit 2013 on May 28th at (Le) Poisson Rouge. At the benefit, New York-based artist Elia Alba will present a new performance that is part of her ongoing project at Recess, “The Supper Club.”

Most of the articles that have appeared about Elia Alba’s work have centered on its post-colonial reckoning of racial and sexual identity. In this regard, her performance/sculpture/video piece If I were a… (2003) stands as an emblematic work. Rocio Aranda-Alvarado describes If I were a… as a depiction of “[l]iteral and imagined miscegenation” in which three body suits are used to represent “a ‘white,’ a ‘black’ and a ‘mixed body.’” (“The Body in Caribbean Art,” ARC, September 2012)

The bodysuits are composed of photographs of Alba’s own face and body, but a male performance artist, Nicholas Dumit Estevez, tries them on — “uncomfortably,” as Alba told the Italian journal Espoarte. In each sequence, intercut by a sepia-toned shot of a pair of hands sewing the garment, Estevez puts on one of the suits and attempts to make it his own, running his hands across the breasts, for example.

The final “mixed body,” it should be noted, is not a blend of the pink and bronze coloring used for the first two, but a patchwork of both, resulting in large light and dark blotches. In the same interview Alba refers to the bodysuits as “distorted images of my own body,” explaining that the work “actualizes that multiform ethnic composition” which is the condition of the identity of Caribbean and Central and South American people. “Such bizarre fusion can be a
fictitious genealogical tree of Latin America."

Elia Alba is not merely skewing gender and race, however, but also creating grotesque images whose dislocations—particularly the oversized masks and the way their chins are cut off to accommodate the size of the wearer’s head—externalize the “socially constructed burden,” as Aranda-Alvarado puts it, “addressed by Frantz Fanon […] the phenotype of outward appearance.”

The discomfitting anatomies mirror the dominant culture’s inability to come to terms with racial otherness, with its own privileges and liberties, and with the consequences of its economic hegemony. We are seeing “multiform racial composition” through the eyes of those most threatened by it.

But, as Sara Reisman writes in “Elia Alba: Identity Unmasked,” her 2009 article for NYFA News: “Perhaps the social, scientific, and political complexity of identity is something to be embraced rather than dissected for clarity.”
This remark bears repeating because Alba’s work is not something that can be tamed by topical or academic discourse. There is an exuberantly intuitive, even irrational side to it. Despite all the press attention focused on racial and sexual identity, when asked in an interview on the website Dodge & Burn (September 17, 2009) what her dream photography project would be, Alba answered, “Traveling to Ireland and Scotland to create a mask project on faeries.”

Thomas Micchelli: You had already begun your *Pixie* photo series (2008) by then, followed by *South Mountain* and the videos *Gigglers* and *Pixie Suite* (all 2010). The characters are simultaneously of our time (evidenced by the schoolgirl teasing in *Gigglers*) and otherworldly in a creepy, crazy way. For *South Mountain*, named for the South Mountain Reservation, a park near South Orange, New Jersey, you cite the influence of *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings* and Dominican folklore. In this series, the characters wear one of two dark-skinned masks (one grinning, one not) and, for the most part, blond dreadlocks, while in the
Pixie series, the masks are of the same, poker-faced white woman, and everyone is wearing platinum-blond wigs. These details bespeak a personal mythology that goes far beyond political and social issues. Are the narratives of the two photo series interrelated? How did the idea of using a white face for one and a black face for the other come about?

Elia Alba: Pixies, Gigglers, and South Mountain are about creating mythologies utilizing both fantasy and science fiction devices that are part of or reference to what we already know, yet they are also very much personal. They present dual consciousness, sometimes multiple but also unattainable things. All these pixies or beings are foreign but they are also foreign in their own skin. They present transforming identities but as you say in a "creepy, crazy way". When we look at the Goldilocks on the beach (part of the Pixie series) you see four very youthful bodies. Clearly there is a disconnect not only from the pale face to the brown body, but the older face to the younger body; the girls were all 14 & 15. It speaks of desire; older women's desire for a youthful body and young woman's desire to be grown. One of my favorite films is Excalibur from 1980. Helen Mirren plays the beautiful yet evil Morgana, who uses her dark powers to maintain her beauty. In the case of South Mountain, the flowered beings (white bodies) and the green being (a derivative mythology from the Dominican Republic, the Ciguapa, brown body) both have the same face. These creatures absurdly fight for the same space, and then come to accept each other with caution. This mythology, or use of a black face, is representative of the struggles within similar groups of people.

TM: Pier Paolo Pasolini believed that by traveling in non-Western countries, as he did in Tanzania and Uganda for Notes for an African Oresteia (1970), he would be able to find societies that are still connected to the rhythms of life that produced the ancient myths. That the myths still lived in their cultures. What do you feel about this perspective in terms of your experience and practice?

EA: In a sense, perhaps, this has merit, but as a person who lives in both realms, the condition of being Western and non-Western at the same time, those "rhythms of life that produce ancient myth" are already present. Family history, oral histories, mythologies of where my parents come from, merge with the Western self. In one way or another histories blend together. That's why these Pixies are not in Ireland but in a tropical land... Brown bodies, black bodies, white bodies, white faces, black faces, fairies, duendes, macihuatli (net-women), ciguapas all come together.
TM: While the critical conversation around your work often mentions its fluidity of sexuality, not much is said about its eroticism. But the videos *La Jaba* and *Water* (both 2003) celebrate the male body in much the same way that male artists over the centuries have celebrated the female.

Also, the symbolic act of taking on another's skin, as Estevez demonstrates in *If I were a...*, is inherently erotic, which you have brought to extremes by swaddling the entire male body in a female envelope. How do you view the place of desire in your work? Is it the glue holding the social constructs together, or gunpowder ready to blow them apart?
TM: Absurdity, which is perpetually coiled inside eroticism, seems ever-present in your work. Do you consciously invoke it or do you find it wherever you look? It is noteworthy that two of the videos that address specific writings on the Other — *Se Devela / Se Revela* (Michael Taussig’s *Defacement*, 1999) and *Eat* (Oswald de Andrade’s “Anthropophagite Manifesto,” 1928) — are also willfully absurd.

EA: It’s very conscious. There intentionally isn’t an order to what I am doing; everything has two, three, four meanings that collapse into one another. I should add that the absurd has its own “structure” but it’s a structure that doesn’t always make people comfortable.

TM: According to the descriptions on your website, you use “serious and absurd text” for *Se Devela / Se Revela* and visual absurdity in *Eat*, in which “the performance artist Clifford Owens attempts to eat a small head, yet he finds it impossible to do so.” You go on to state, countering Andrade’s manifesto, “the benefit of ingesting other cultures and ideas [Andrade posited cannibalism as a Brazilian nationalist defense against European culture] doesn’t present itself as true.” What is it about Taussig and Andrade that led you to such responses?

EA: Andrade was addressing a privileged group of Brazilian artists. More than defense against European culture, I would say it is a consummation of power. In this case I wanted to use the Andrade concept of cannibalism and flip it. The impossibility of ingesting the head is a metaphor for power relations that cross racial and class boundaries. Taussig’s examination of the negative through the notion of the “public secret” addresses power as well. The title *Se Devela / Se
Revela was a phrase taken from the book that references the Zapatista movement in which the masked leader, Subcommandante Marcos, was not a peasant but an upper middle class man. For Taussig being faceless, or taking it further, masked, releases the power of the face in a proliferation of identities, which in turn “discharges the powers of representation.” So unmasking masking reveals the secret; in the video the subject is in a constant state of unmasking. For me it goes back to the absurd and how it ties in with transgression. Transgression, according to Taussig, is inherent in the public secret, and it’s an idea that makes sense. Masking is not just a device to thwart identification but more to reconfigure reality with fantasy, specifically the transformation and creation of identities.

All this being said, humor plays a lot in the works. I never want to be didactic or heavy-handed in the presentation. I’m interested, through humor, the absurd and some disturbia (hahaha), in presenting works that are socially and critically engaging.

TM: In Unruhe (Unrest, 2001), a two-channel installation shot at the beach, a half-dozen heads, give or take, wash up in the surf. They all seem to be watching and thinking, an uncanny element that makes some of the later sequences, in which we see a pair of hands wringing out a head, all the more hilarious.

EA: It should be noted that while the heads are part of a seascape, which is transformed with the presence of those faces, the other sequence presents a schizophrenic dream, a repetition of games in which an anonymous subject repeatedly manipulates a face. Sometimes those jarring images can make you laugh but it’s a nervous one.

TM: How do you photograph your subjects? Are their images selected from random multiple exposures or do you engage in a dialogue that produces the exact expression you want?

EA: For the masks I am very specific of how I ask my subject to pose and usually it is with a scenario in mind, but then I always bring the personality of the sitter into the photograph. There is always some element in the work that I take from my observation about the sitter’s personality.
TM: In your upcoming performance for Recess Art, where will you be taking us?

EA: I am currently working on a publication / event series titled *The Supper Club* with Recess. The project, a response to Vanity Fair Magazine’s Hollywood edition, will be an archival publication that frames fifty artists of color as celebrities, transforming their identities into iconic, fantastical images, as well as dialog amongst them. For the Recess performance I will be photographing two of the artists during the evening with audience participation. I will be performing as a photographer yet actually photographing the artists… sounds like reality TV or better yet *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (camp classic of the 70s). Every artist in the book has a moniker and during the performance
you will meet The Ringleader and the Linguist. Let’s just say you will be confronted with a tower of Babel and then we are off to the circus!

_Elia Alba_ was born in New York City. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Hunter College in 1994 and completed the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 2001. Her work has been exhibited at Studio Museum in Harlem, El Muñeco del Barrio; The RISD Museum; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Science Museum, London; ITAU Cultural Institute, Sao Paolo Museo Vacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid and the 10th Havana Biennial. Solo shows include Jersey City Museum, Galeria Overfoto, Italy and Black & White Gallery in New York. Awards include, Studio Museum in Harlem Artist-in-Residence Program (1999), New York Foundation for the Arts Grant (Craft 2002 and Photography 2008; Pollack-KrasnerFoundation Grant (2002) and Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant (2002 and 2008), LMCC Workspace Program (2009), Flying Horse Editions (2011). Recent acquisition includes The Smithsonian American Museum. She is currently an artist-in-residence at Recess Activities where she is working on a publication / event series titled “The Supper Club”. She is also working on another publication with publisher Photology in Milan on Larry Levan and DJ culture.
Thomas Micchelli is an artist, writer, filmmaker and co-editor of Hyperallergic Weekend. His paintings and drawings have recently been exhibited at Centotto, Norte Maar and Studio 10, all in Bushwick, Brooklyn. In addition to Hyperallergic, his essays and reviews have appeared in The Brooklyn Rail, Art 21 and NY Arts.

Celebrate Recess’ four years of ambitious artists’ projects at **Four More Years: Recess Benefit 2013** on May 28th at (Le) Poisson Rouge. The evening will feature a musical performance by TECLA, DJ sets by DJ Marty McSorley and DJ AJ Slim, artist performances by Elia Alba and Jacolby Satterwhite, artist installations by Zach Gage and John Miserendino, and an editioned benefit print by David Horvitz. Purchase tickets [here](#).