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artists

## *Spicy Meals Where Race Is the Main Course: Elia Alba and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz Broach Tough Topics Over Lamb and Hummus*

A supper club unites artists of color to discuss art, the art world

By Andrew Russeth 10/09 5:17pm



Alba's second dinner, with Raimundi-Ortiz, dressed as Chuleta, at left in blue, at the Franco-Caribbean restaurant Kaz An Nou in Brooklyn. (Courtesy Recess Activites)

**TWO SUNDAYS AGO**, about a dozen artists received an e-mail summoning them to a Lebanese restaurant on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. They were instructed to come alone, and not to be late. The e-mailed was signed "The Supper Club."

Sinister? Not in the least. The message, from Allison Weisberg, director of Soho and Red Hook arts space Recess Activities, began with an air-kissy "Hello dears," and continued, "At long last, we're ready to serve you." The call for punctuality was jokily threatening ("If you're late you will be hazed") but the no-guests policy had a very art-world explanation: "The attendees of the event are heavily curated for your enjoyment." The artists who gathered at Tripoli the following evening had been waiting for these details. They'd agreed to participate in an art event organized by Brooklyn-based artist Elia Alba that was about much more than art.

Ms. Alba handpicked 50 artists of color for a series of three such dinners, each at a different restaurant; she invited them for the purpose of speaking candidly about race, art and a variety of other topics. Those who attended included established talents, like septuagenarian Lorraine O'Grady (who received a round of applause at the second dinner), rising stars like Sanford Biggers and Mickalene Thomas, and younger artists, like Firelei Baez and Jacolby Satterwhite. They hailed from the U.S., South Asia, the Caribbean and elsewhere.

Maybe it was that threat of hazing, but by the appointed time of 6:15 p.m., Ms. Baez, Mr. Biggers, Mr. Satterwhite, Hank Willis Thomas and about half a dozen others had gathered around a table and fallen into easy chatter. A waiter brought pita, hummus and bottles of wine.

"Don't drink it all, bitches!" Bronx-born artist Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, the evening's designated host, crowed from one end of the table. "I *said*, don't drink it all, bitches!" Ms. Raimundi-Ortiz, 39, wore a bright red wig, rhinestone hoop earrings and a tight dress, also bedecked with rhinestones. She rounded the table, plopped down in a chair next to *The Observer*, and began regaling the group with stories of her life in Orlando, where she'd moved from New York to teach art.

Mr. Thomas asked how she liked the city. She likes the weather and the lifestyle, but there have been tough moments. "Once I left out of New York City, and I'm out in Gringolandia, even if I'm not trying to be a Boricua out there, they have no problem letting me know, 'Oh you speak so well!' Oh, really? For real?" Orlando does, however, have its saving graces. "It's very polite, very Southern."

"If they say, 'Bless your heart,' that's a Southern 'fuck you,'" she explained.

"Chuleta, this is a dinner table!" Ms. Alba admonished, using the name of Ms. Raimundi-Ortiz's YouTube alter ego. It means "porkchop" in Spanish; in the tradition of Sacha Baron Cohen's Ali G figure, Chuleta (a lovable, sometimes-abrasive woman whom Ms. Raimundi-Ortiz characterized as "a hood-rat chick") offers truth-telling, artspeak-free lessons about contemporary art in her videos.

"What, ain't nobody here heard the word *fuck* before?" she replied.

"No."

"I don't believe that." She rolled her eyes. "That's a fucking lie."

Then it was time for the dinner to officially begin. “You don’t have to applaud,” Chuleta said, after being introduced by Ms. Weisberg. “I’ll wait. I didn’t travel a thousand miles to see you bitches.” She got her applause, and dove in. “I think I’m less interested in the art world per se, and I’m more interested in how the art world works, and what the art world has to say about us, and what we say in return,” she ventured. “I wanted to ask you guys, how do you identify yourself? Who are you? Are we—is this a table of artists of color, or are we just a bunch of artists? Is that a hat that we take off and put on when it’s convenient? Like, what’s up?”

There was a long silence before Simone Leigh said, “I never take anything on or off. I think I’m just black. I don’t worry about it. I’m very black all the time.”

Then others jumped in. “As a Caribbean woman, as a woman of color, I’ve always been put in the position of being seen and processed as the good black,” Nicole Awai said. “I’m always the *good black*.”

“The good black,” Chuleta said, nodding. “*Damn*.”

**MS ALBA’S SUPPER CLUB** dinners take their inspiration from dining clubs of old. “It alludes to the supper clubs of the ’20s and ’30s, during Prohibition,” she told *The Observer* in an interview. “They were gathering places for artists, gangsters and the intellectual folk of the time. They could sit and talk about politics, art and life. That’s what I wanted to recreate.” Ms. Alba, 50, works in a variety of media and has recently made uncanny busts by carefully wrapping fabric faces around metal frames—pieces that embody the constructed, sometimes delicate, nature of identity.

The dinners come at a time when nonwhite artists are more visible than ever, yet still marginalized. In financial terms (today’s most popular, if unsavory, measure of value), white artists continue to dominate. Excepting a tiny handful of people, including David Hammons, Takashi Murakami and the late Jean-Michel Basquiat (recently described to this reporter as a “complete urban primitive” by an auction-house specialist), artists of color rarely have work included in the top-tier evening auctions—their prices are too low.

Other indicators are mixed. Museums and galleries are showing artists of color with increasing frequency, though they still represent a disproportionately small portion of the art world’s top echelon. *Artforum* has devoted its cover to some artists of color over the past few years, but has tended to focus more on late-career figures (L.A.’s Asco group, painter Jack Whitten, sculptor Jimmie Durham) than younger artists. (Vietnamese-born Danh Vo got the nod in 2010.)

But Ms. Alba wasn’t staging her dinners as some form of polemic. “I’m really interested in gray areas,” she told *The Observer*. “I am a black woman, but my family’s from the Dominican Republic, so I’m always interested in those spaces that don’t identify with either/or.”

**AT THAT FIRST DINNER**, Mr. Satterwhite, at 26 the youngest person at the table—"I got T-shirts older than you!" Chuleta needled—spoke up. "I am who I am," he said. "I am black, I am gay, and I am an artist." But he doesn't use those facts to pander, he continued, describing his experience of racial identity hanging over work by artists of color. "When I was in grad school, if you put a white box in a space, they'd be like, 'Mmm ... what's *that* about?'" This was greeted with empathic laughs around the table. "You need to think of strategies to depoliticize that moment."

The conversation moved fluidly from Tupac to Emory Douglas, Beyoncé to Philip Guston as everyone dug into chicken and lamb atop mountains of rice. There were stories of discrimination at some institutions, and of how thoroughly context, geographical and otherwise, can change how art and race are viewed. There were lively debates about the value and power of minstrelsy, and the degree to which any artist has to perform his or her own identity to succeed.

As the dinner wound down, Rajkamal Kahlon asked the table, "In what ways do each of us compromise in terms of the performance of our identities when we encounter institutions that can legitimize us?"

Sometimes, Mr. Biggers volunteered, "you get asked to be in a show because they want you to exemplify said blackness or coloriness or otherness, and they're just waiting you to *do that shit you do*."

"You can't ever resist it, though, can you?" Mr. Thomas shot back.

Ms. Alba plans to work with Recess to publish transcripts of the dinners in a book that will come complete with glamorous *Vanity Fair*-style photographs of the participants, each labeled with a special moniker (Ms. Thomas is "The Female Gaze," Ms. O'Grady "The Trailblazer"). "Artists are kind of the unsung heroes when it comes to arts," she said. "I wanted to make everyone into these iconic, celebrity figures." Though she was present at each meal, she made a point of participating minimally in the discussions. "Bringing everyone together," she said. "That is my statement."

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