Eldzier Cortor
by Terry Carbone

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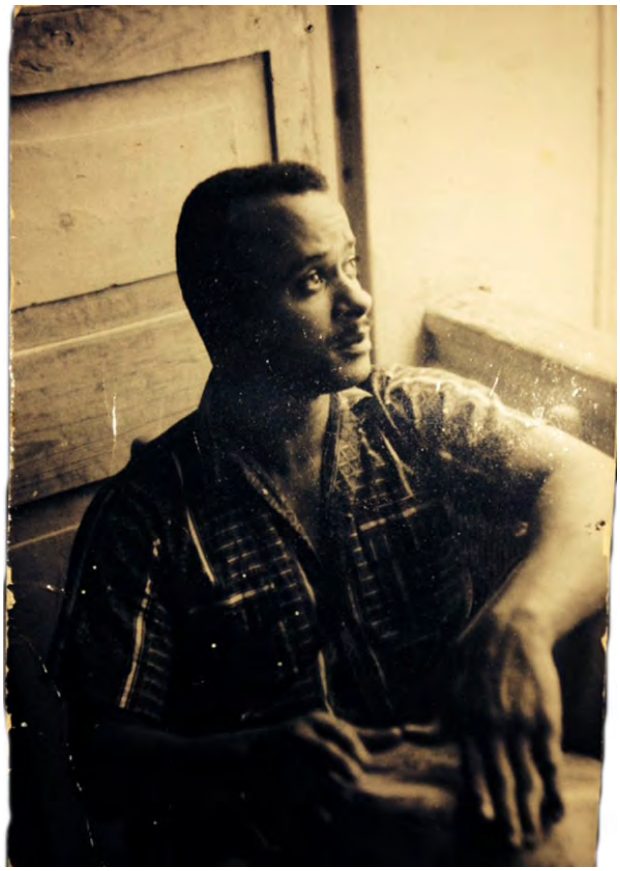


A young Eldzier Cortor, ca. 1950. Courtesy of Michael Cortor.

American Art lost a unique and vital presence last year, when the painter and master printmaker Eldzier Cortor died on Thanksgiving Day, just months before his 100th birthday. The oral history presented here is synthesized from two interviews permitted by this intensely modest and private man, at the Brooklyn Museum in 2014, and for BOMB at his Lower East Side home last fall. I was introduced to the work of Eldzier Cortor in 2005, when I saw his arresting *Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)* in a booth at the Park Avenue Armory. The painting presents two beautiful, young black figures stretched out on a grassy hill, while behind them flood waters sweep through a valley and carry away unmoored, frame houses. The figures appear calm, owing to the artist's having cast their faces according to the forms of African masks. We purchased the picture for the Brooklyn Museum, where it has hung ever since. I called Mr. Cortor at the time. Although he claimed he remembered little about a work he had created sixty years earlier, he subsequently completed a questionnaire with precision, noting his materials ("Gesso panel, Shiva casein paint, Shiva emulsion, Shiva oil paint, Shiva glossy varnish, Damar varnish—glossy finish.") and the location, a site in Kentucky that he had witnessed en route to the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. He wrote, "It was created from my feelings in the face of devastation, and the two figures represent youth with hope." When I asked Mr. Cortor if he would come to the museum to speak, he replied with a polite but categorical "no thank you."

Five years later, when the artist's son Michael called to say that his dad was hoping to place other work in museums as gifts, we met them at a storage facility for a two-hour visit. Having

apologized for not moving as quickly as he once could, Mr. Cortor walked us through paintings and prints, pointing out details of subjects, materials, and techniques. We chose eleven prints—including six of the Haïti "*Abbatoir*" subjects that demonstrate his masterful abstraction—and a late painting, *Lady with Red Piano*. Again, he politely declined an invitation to speak at the museum.

In 2014, Michael phoned to say he had convinced his dad to come to Brooklyn to record a video. This would be his first time on film, so there could be no big lights, no moving cameras. On a sweltering summer day we readied a study room with all fourteen works, now in the collection, hoping to glean comments about each of them in the course of a precious hour. So began a glorious three hours, by the end of which Mr. Cortor had exhausted all of us. Eldzier Cortor's world was opened to us that day: recollections of the Art Institute of Chicago; his experience of segregated buses and trains en route to South Carolina; his first visits to MoMA; memories of the vast iron-framed slaughterhouse in Haïti. He spoke at length about printing, from pulling woodcuts in his kitchen; to spending all-nighters at a New York City print studio in the '70s, when it was too dangerous to head home. When asked what he wanted people to know about his career, he replied, "Summing up? I don't think I'm ready yet—I still paint."

My last encounter with Eldzier was thanks to BOMB's invitation to conduct an oral history at the artist's request. When we gathered at his apartment just weeks before his passing, he was as lively as ever. Although we revisited some familiar conversations, new details arose—a drive to Mexico to meet Elizabeth Catlett, hanging out with Beauford Delaney in the East Village—and some clearer hints of his personal struggle. He recalled, "I only had this one brush, this Chinese brush... that was my brush in school." Struggle inflected Eldzier Cortor's work in subtle ways—in the reserve and watchfulness of his figures, and in the aura of old, worn things, the dressers and chairs, and personal souvenirs. "It's like Citizen Kane," he said as our interview drew to a close. Eldzier Cortor's connection to the world was deep and sustained, and his dedication to his art was absolute. He was pleased by the growing recognition of his work—his paintings hang not only in Brooklyn, but in the permanent galleries of the Art Institute of Chicago, the MFA Boston, and elsewhere—but he was also keenly aware of the belatedness of the art establishment in placing them there. The arc of Eldzier Cortor's career is now complete. His patience and longevity accommodated our late-coming.

—Teresa A. Carbone

Terry Carbone *Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)* has been in the galleries [at the Brooklyn Museum] for eight years now.

Eldzier Cortor Oh, is that right?

TC And it truly is one of my favorite works in the gallery.

EC And that's really a scene there 'cause I was going through Kentucky and we had a Sandy-type of situation. I was on a fellowship at the time, driving through. I was going down South—

Eldzier Cortor. *Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)*, ca. 1939–1940. Tempera and gesso on board, 20 x 34 in. Brooklyn Museum. © Eldzier Cortor

TC This was the first fellowship, the Rosenwald?

EC The Rosenwald. Yeah. I had the Rosenwald Fellowship [1945–1947] and then the Guggenheim Fellowship [1949]. I was going down to the Sea Islands, down South. But before that I was going through Kentucky and I saw those houses.

TC Now, was this a storm?

EC It was a flood.

TC There were also the hydroelectric dams at the time. So I always wondered if it had something to do with that.

EC And around that period, too, they had the Dust Bowl. Now we have other types of things, you see.

TC The landscape is what you actually saw?

EC Yeah, I saw those houses down below water level as I was going through. And this is just a woman. (*pointing at the painting*) These are their little possessions. If some calamity happens —

TC —you take off.

EC But you look around to see what to take with you. You know what I mean? Like, what's most valuable to you: your passport, your house keys, or something like that. So you have to do some quick thinking. I have another version of this painting too [*Southern Landscape* (1941)]. I think Michael Rosenfeld Gallery has the one with the basket, you see.

Southern Landscape, 1941. Oil on Masonite, 34 1/4 x 26 in. Collection of Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. © Eldzier Cortor

TC And she has a little picture.

EC A little picture—her possession, you know.

TC But did you actually see houses floating down the river?

EC Yeah, I saw the houses. Well, we had Hurricane Sandy here. Michael, my son, his house—I think he had to run upstairs. He lives on Long Island. And they had something like that there. Were you affected by Sandy?

TC Not terribly.

EC For two weeks I couldn't come down the stairs of my building. I live on the nineteenth floor and I was locked in, here in Manhattan. So with this painting here, *Southern Landscape (Southern Flood),* I was on my way to the Sea Islands. And as I said, it's just a young couple. You bring to the picture what you want to. I was just interested in the grouping of the pictures, of painting a young couple with their possessions.

TC Did you use models for these paintings?

EC No, no. I don't use models. Except for that piano [in *Lady with Red Piano*, 1994]. I went down to Steinway, down in the basement, on Fiftieth Street, Fifty-Second Street, I think. And I looked at old upright pianos. So then I drew the piano hammers—exact, you see. And I went down to Lincoln Center and looked up those song sheets, too.

TC Really? You looked up the sheet music?

EC Yeah. And I put the notes down. If you look at it, it follows the notes on the piano.

TC So you could play it.

EC I don't know how to play. (*laughter*) I wish I did. I love the piano. It's my favorite instrument.

TC But for the figure you didn't use a model?

EC The figure is just—I could draw, you see. Like looking at you, I can draw you from memory. I've learned how to… and also nude figures… I've had figure-drawing classes in art school and things like that. And so this [*Lady with Red Piano*] is a still life along with a figure, and the arrangement of the drapery and other things like that.

Lady with Red Piano, 1994. Oil on canvas, 24 x 43 in. Brooklyn Museum. © Eldzier Cortor

TC So right before you did this work, before you did *Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)*, you were working in the Easel Division Program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in Chicago.

EC Oh yeah, and that one [*Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)*] was made on a gesso panel. At that time we were experimenting with gesso panels.

TC Were those experiments part of your WPA work?

EC Yeah, they had an art supply room and you'd just go down to collect your paint, you see. And you would get a chance to meet the older artists, too, which was very good because I was in my early twenties at the time.

TC Who do you remember meeting at that time? Was that when you met Archibald Motley?

EC Yeah, Motley and even Ivan Albright. Do you remember Albright?

TC I do.

EC The movie: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)... [He painted the painting of Dorian Gray for the film adaptation.] I think Albright was there. He was on the WPA.

TC What did you think of his work at the time? Do you remember?

EC I didn't know him as a matter of fact, but I heard about him. Him and his brother were twins. And he drew during the war [WWI]. He drew wounds, medical drawings for the army.

TC They're amazing.

EC So I think that affected his art later on. Then he was on the WPA with me, and that woman was always driving him crazy because she was the type of... she was someone who would look at clouds in a painting and say, "Too many phallic symbols!" (*laughter*) He was a slow painter too. You were supposed to turn out so many paintings, you see.

TC Do you remember her name? She was your supervisor at the Easel Division Program out in Chicago?

EC Yeah, I think her name was Arklin. I shouldn't put her name down. I don't want her to go down in history like that. (*laughter*) Yeah, and I remember Motley too.

TC What was he like?

EC You know he had been to Paris. Once they'd been to Paris, they never seem to get over it. He was really into this idea of a *real* artist with his palette, with the paint built up on it, the brush, and the smock, naturally. I think there's a photograph of him in the *Chicago Defender*. That's the black newspaper... [Motley received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1926 and spent a year in Paris.] All artists seemed to never get over Paris. That was the place to go in those days.

TC Did that tempt you to go yourself?

EC No. For some reason, I don't know, I think I was just interested in the history of art probably, not the place, you see.

TC And you studied with Helen Gardner at the Art Institute.

EC Helen Gardner covered everything in that book [*Art Through the Ages* (1948)], as a matter of fact. She would start with slides and things like that.

TC You really studied with the authority!

EC Yeah. She had her class there at Fulton Hall, I remember. A lot of people would go to her class and fall asleep. You know, 'cause of the dark. They would turn the lights down a little low and that was the first class in the morning.

TC You must have gone right back to sleep. And Kathleen Blackshear...

EC Blackshear! She did the illustrations in Gardner's book too. Blackshear helped me so much there.

TC Talk a little bit about that. What was she like?

EC Yeah, she was very good! She took me under her wing there, as a matter of fact.

TC Smart move on her part.

EC 'Cause I really wanted to be a cartoonist. I wasn't into oil painting. I was into drawings. Drawing was my first love.

TC You were a natural draftsman.

EC If you notice, there are a lot of little drawings [in these paintings we're looking at]. At the bottom of them there are drawings. It's just a whole different thing than the paint. Then you have paint strokes, the brush, and the palette knife. This is a mixture of different techniques. (*pointing at Lady with Red Piano*)

TC Yeah, it's in relief. When you say Kathleen Blackshear took you under her wing, what do you mean by that? Did she critique your art or bring you to museums?

EC She took the whole class to the Art Institute museum. That was one of the good things about the Art Institute. You would go up, and mind you we were in Chicago, but she would stand us up before the works of the Hudson River painters and tell us all about them. Or she would take you to the French painters and talk about little things, personal things. And we had a mixed class, you see. The first year students hadn't decided what they wanted to do yet. They may have wanted to be a public school teacher or a painter, or an architect, or whatever. But they took the introductory course so you'd get a little taste of everything. And that's when I was left with the painting part, 'cause that's where I felt at home and comfortable. We also did three-dimensional things. We did still lifes.

TC All studio work...

EC Or we would draw live models, female and male subjects, different things like that, you see. Then we would have to design a powder box or a candy box, little commercial things like that, too.

TC So a little of everything.

EC So you'd see where you'd fit in.

TC You could segue into different directions. Now, that was with Kathleen Blackshear when you went to the Field Museum, right? Was that your first exposure to African Art?

EC Well, you know why she was into that? Because of Picasso and Cubism, and those things that were in France and here, too, you see.

TC So she was interested in Cubism and that's why—

EC Yeah. She was very much into that. But she made a short shift to realism. And that's what happened. You went from different classes and different teachers. And sometimes from this class... I don't know if you ever had something like that when you went to school. Some classes you would shine in and others you wouldn't. And some classes you were just awful in. (*laughter*)

TC All right, so what class were you awful in?

EC In Blackshear's class I shined. In the other class... Believe it or not, the life drawing class I wasn't so hot in, until one day there was a substitute teacher and he looked at my work. He thought I was from the advanced class upstairs. So then I realized I wasn't hooked into this other teacher. You know what I mean?

TC So what did the first teacher not like about your work?

EC There was something about my freestyle. This guy had a really worked-out type of thing or whatnot. And I was like the free spirit type of guy, you see. Like you look at Aristide Maillol and the old Greek statues... I love those Greek statues, especially the one at the Louvre there: the *Winged Victory* (ca. 190 BC).

TC Yes!

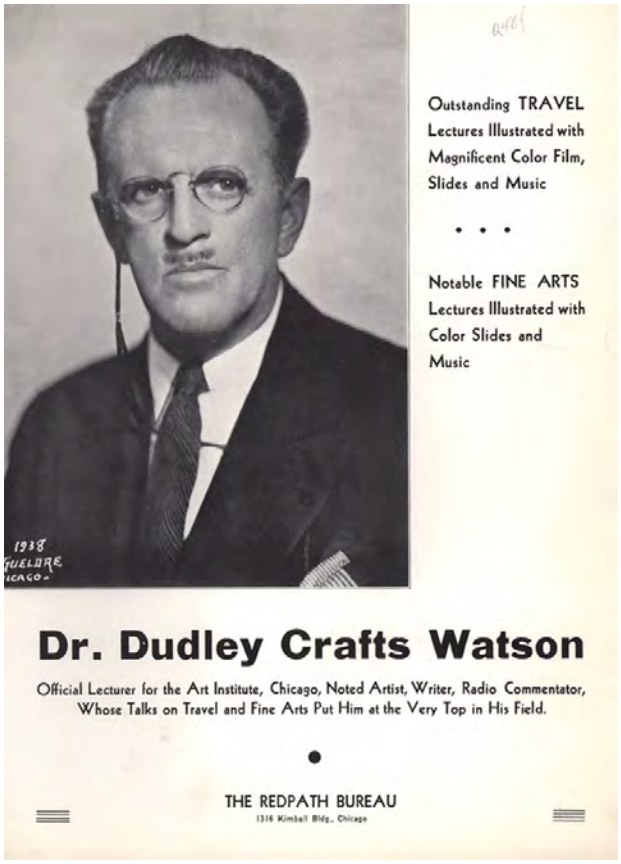
EC That thing soars!

TC So your colleagues, your fellow students have all become illustrious people, like Charles White—

EC Yeah, well I went to high school with him.

TC You went to high school with him as well?

EC Yeah, we went to high school together at Englewood High School in Chicago. They had art in high school too. They would even take us to the museum. On Saturdays they had what you call, for the young kids: field trips. A fellow would get up there; he would explain and discuss the paintings. His name was Dudley Crafts Watson. I remember him.



Promotional brochure for a lecture by Dr. Dudley Crafts Watson, 1938. Courtesy of the Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.

TC And this is public school?

EC Public school! And he was throwing things at us. We hadn't even gotten to Da Vinci or the *Mona Lisa* yet. But he discussed different things, especially the paintings at the Art Institute. The museum had a whole array of paintings there. What's that thing, the promenade one?

TC The Georges Seurat [*A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884)].

EC Yeah, and he discussed a number of El Grecos, and the works along the staircase.

TC So where did you live while you were a student in Chicago?

EC I lived on the West Side for a while. I don't know if you've heard of Halsted Street? Have you ever been to Chicago or know about it?

TC Yeah, I know a little bit.

EC I lived near the Hull House for a while. Then I lived on the South Side for a while too. But as I've said before, every building in Chicago has to look out for itself. I think the other building was Frank Lloyd Wright's Midway Gardens. They tore it down [in 1929].

TC So in Chicago, were you living with your family while you were a student? Or did you get your own place?

EC I had my own place. I lived on my own. They had something called the South Side Community Art Center.

TC I've read about it. So you had an apartment and it was near the Hull House?

EC Well, I lived there for a while and then I lived in this place.

TC You actually lived in the SSCAC?

EC Yeah. I lived there and I taught there too.

TC So it was like a residency?

EC Yeah, it was like a residency. A baseball player and the owner of the White Sox put up that place. Charles Comiskey was his name. And he owned the building [The Comiskey Mansion]. Then the Depression came and those places were abandoned. So the place was given to the WPA and the Federal Art Project. Then they created what you call the SSCAC. And it's still going on today, as a matter of fact.

Eldzier Cortor teaching a painting class at the South Side Community Art Center, ca. 1950. Courtesy of the South Side Community Art Center, Chicago, IL.

TC Do you remember the atmosphere at the Easel Division Program at the WPA? Did people work together in a room? Did they work on their own? Did they just get assignments?

EC If you were a painter, you painted. If you were a carpenter, you did carpentry. Whatever it was. And then you would go and work. They built a number of community art centers. And they took old buildings. At that time, during the Depression, a lot of people left their homes. You know, there were those Victorian mansions. Anyway, some people worked together in the same room. The sculptors and others would be working on different floors.

TC At the SSCAC?

EC Yeah, it was like a huge loft there. They would have some people work on the premises, but the painting part you took home.

TC Oh really?

EC You'd go downstairs and order your canvas, which they would stretch for you.

TC And you could paint any subjects you wanted?

EC Yeah, and at the time they had Shiva paint products. And casein paint was coming into use then too.

TC That's so interesting that all these experiments with tempera and casein were happening in the '30s.

EC And that's when that Masonite board came out too.

TC In the '30s?

EC Yeah. It was like a revolution. It was all new. I think this one [*Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)*] is on Masonite.

TC This one is gesso on Masonite, yeah.

EC I think they put gesso on the Masonite beforehand, as a matter of fact. But it's got rabbit-skin glue and different things like that in the gesso. It's not just the white casein paint, that chalky paint on there. And then you sand it down and add another coat—you know, several coats. And I think that's oil and tempera. It's held up well there. I don't know if you guys retouched it or anything like that.

TC No, not the paint.

EC I noticed this one here [*Lady with Red Piano*] changed and this one here is lead and zinc white. Those things are no-no things now. You know what I mean? But Rembrandt used lead paint too. So as long as it held up—I think I mentioned it to you, about the Smithsonian. The fellow said, "We have people around here. Give them work to do." You know, to retouch these paintings.

TC You don't really want to do that. Your paintings seem very healthy.

EC You ever heard of something called black oil?

TC No.

EC [*Southern Gate* (1942–43)] was painted with black oil. It's a large nude at the Smithsonian. And I was looking to see how it held up there.

TC What do you mean by black oil?

EC That's what you used. It's mixed with lead and different things like that. You cook it.

TC Was it the medium for your pigment?

EC Yeah. I think there's a fellow who wrote a book on paint. What was his name? Mayer?

TC Ralph Mayer. Didn't you study with him?

EC Yeah, I studied with Ralph Mayer once at Columbia and he was against that black oil. But *Southern Gate* was one of the few paintings where I did use black oil. It's still there. It still holds up, you see.

Southern Gate, 1942–43. Oil on canvas, 46 1/4 x 22 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum. © Eldzier Cortor

TC So when you applied for the Rosenwald was that something that a lot of people were doing, trying to get foundation support in the '40s? Were you the first in your group to apply for a Rosenwald?

EC Oh no, a lot of people applied: Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett...

TC So they did it first.

EC They did the Rosenwald too. By the way, there's a ton of my work at the Smithsonian Institute. They also have a whole bunch of my letters at the Archives of American Art. They even came here and picked up some boxes over the years. You know, correspondences, stuff like that. If you ever want that information, you could go there and look at whatever they have.

TCI would love to do that. So when you applied for the Rosenwald to go the Sea Islands, was that the only place you absolutely wanted to go or were there other places you thought about possibly going?

EC Well no, that was a section that I wanted to go to because—St. Helena is a little island off

of Beaufort, South Carolina. The Sea Islands are where the Gullah people live. They don't like the term Gullah among them, you see. They speak an archaic English and it sounds like West Indian dialects. But the Gullah people, their language is more closely related to the English speaking language. It's got African language mixed with English.

TC So you were looking to explore those communities?

EC I wanted to see the Sea Islands because that was a *good* part of the South. Going down South was really rough in those days. I had to ride a segregated train. If you were wise to the place—sometimes people would come from Mississippi to Chicago and they would go to the back of the bus. They were used to doing that. There were signs in Charleston.

I had to stop off in Charleston before taking a boat to St. Helena. I had somebody to visit in Charleston: my friend's mother. So before I went to St. Helena I got off the train and stayed with her. She then took me to St. Helena. We went to church there and I began to notice that people were speaking this broken English, this Gullah type of English. When you go down there the language is so thick!

TC So how did you settle in?

EC I stayed with a lady that lived there. Oh, they also had this thing called the William Penn School [now called the Penn Center]. They were Quakers. After the Civil War the Quakers went to St. Helena, which is really an island by itself. It's connected to the mainland by a bridge now. In those days they didn't have a bridge. So the people on that island were cut off. It was another culture to live there.

At the Penn School the Quakers taught people how to survive on their own, because they were cut off from the rest of the world. The South was really in turmoil then. So the Islands were the most liberal part of the South, because the people owned land there, you see.

TC They were given land?

EC Yeah. And you could visit all the tombstones and the graveyards of the original inhabitants; the mausoleums, things like that. It was all in turmoil: the tombs were knocked over. I just happened to wander over. I had bought a pig, but he got out. He took off and I was running around the house looking for this damn pig. And you know what? I saw my pig later on. He became a boar. He transformed into a wild animal. So someone bought me another pig one day. But I was like a gentleman farmer. I was growing some peas and things. Oh, by the way, the lady I stayed with, she had a co-op store down there too. I hardly went to the city.

I did some drawings and then sent them to Howard University. I sent drawings all throughout my time there. And this woman that I stayed with in St. Helena, she had gone to Howard too.

TC Do you remember her name?

EC Ms. Chaplin. She looked out for me. As I said, it was a whole different experience there. I did many drawings and took several trips up to Howard University.

TC While you were in the Sea Islands?

EC Yeah, and I had some drawings with me of the islands. I would take them with me. I knew the curators there at Howard University: James V. Herring and, oh I forgot his name there, the head of the art department. They would buy a few drawings and that would pay for my trip, you see. I have a number of other things from the Sea Islands there.

TC In their collection?

EC Yeah.

TC Did you find it easy to be there as a city kid from Chicago? What was it like?

EC Chicago was like a small town. It's a neighborhood, you see.

TC So it wasn't a hard transition?

EC Chicago is really squared off into neighborhoods. There are some very ethnic neighborhoods, too, there. You know they have the Russian area, the Italian area, the oriental area, the black area… I don't know how it is now, though. It's probably more diverse or integrated now. But they had equal opportunity there. The black areas had big movie theaters. They even had a symphony orchestra in the movie house. It was almost like going to Radio City Music Hall. They had a jazz orchestra and a symphony orchestra.

TC So a lot of culture...

EC There was a lot of culture! They had a big middle class there, as a matter of fact.

TC So what made you come to New York?

EC I had to experience New York. I used to travel back and forth to New York. I used to catch a bus.

TC From Chicago to New York?

EC Yes.

TC So when are we talking about? What year did you start taking the bus to New York?

EC Right after I came outta school [in 1936].

TC So into the '40s?

EC Yeah. I've always taken the bus. As a matter a fact, that painting [*The Room No. VI* (1948)], I took that one on a bus. That painting is at the Art Institute of Chicago. I worked on that painting in New York and took it back to Chicago with me. I took the Greyhound bus. And I was staying at a hotel—

TC A hotel here in New York?

EC Yeah, in Harlem. It was a nude picture. (*laughter*)

TC You made a little bit of a stir. You remember the name of the hotel up there?

The Room No. VI, 1948. Oil and gesso on Masonite, 42 1/4 x 31 1/2 in. Art Institute Chicago. © Eldzier Cortor.

EC Oh no, so many darn hotels there. I think the Teresa was the main one, but I didn't go there. It was expensive. They had boxers like Joe Lewis and Sugar Ray Robinson stay there—I don't know if you know those names.

TC I do.

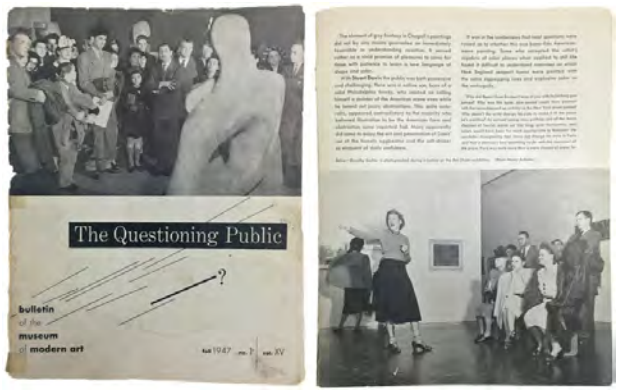
EC I stayed in the little hotels in New York.

TC So you came just to paint a bit in New York?

EC Oh yeah, because I'd come to New York to go to galleries and things like that.

TC So you came to do some looking.

EC This here is '47. That's me. (*showing a picture in a catalogue*)



Above: a copy of "The Questioning Public," Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art. Fall 1947. No. 1, Vol. XV. Courtesy of Michael Cortor.
Below: detail image of Eldzier Cortor at the Ben Shahn retrospective in 1947.

TC So you went to see the Ben Shahn retrospective in 1947?

EC At the Museum of Modern Art. That place has changed so much now.

TC Is this just coincidence that they took this picture of you?

EC Yeah. And you know what? Someone at the Art Institute showed me that.

TC They recognized you. So you took the bus to New York and you were staying in a hotel in Harlem. So you would do some looking and then go back to your hotel room to paint right there?

EC Oh yeah.

TC Do you remember what galleries you would go to at that point? Did you have favorites?

EC Well, the Associated American Artists Gallery represented me. They handled prints.

TC Right, very important.

EC And there was the Martha Jackson Gallery. When Martha died her son gave this painting [*Southern Gate* (1942–43)] to the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. That's a nude picture there too.

TC So you sold through Martha Jackson Gallery?

EC Yeah, I was represented by Martha Jackson Gallery for a while. Jackson Pollock and those people were coming up at that time ['40s and '50s] and Eighth Street was the hub, with Hans Hofmann and abstract art. I never joined that group though, the abstract artists. But that was a group that was first flourishing at the time.

TC How did you meet Martha Jackson?

EC Well, she bought a painting from me. She's from the Kellogg family, the cornflake cereal. She opened the gallery in 1952. I don't know how she got that painting, *Southern Gate*. I think all that work went to the Smithsonian after she died.

TC One of my first volunteer jobs was at the Smithsonian.

EC Oh, is that right?

TC I was cataloguing her gift. I didn't know about these shorter stays in New York before you actually lived here.

EC I always kept on coming back here, over a period of time. And then I was away at other places too. I just didn't fit in anymore in Chicago. You know, it's like going back to high school.

TC You grew out of it.

EC Yeah, I grew out of it. Then being in New York—I knew a lot of artists here: the Abstract Expressionists.

TC Yeah, the Cedar Bar group. So who did you hang out with when you first came to New York? Do you remember which artists you were hanging out with?

EC I remember the Village was my hangout ground. But everyone was in the Village. They had the Tennessee Williams group there; The Circle in the Square Theatre. They had all these different groups coming up.

TC There was a lot going on. And how about in terms of race, working in New York at that time, did everyone just affiliate with one another?

EC No, they had prejudice here.

TC Can you talk a little bit about that? I mean how did you experience that?

EC Well, sometimes people have their little areas; they didn't want some other group to come into their area. They probably beat up on them or something like that. Oh yeah, they had things like that. But the early *Village Voice* came up then and that was the swinging paper at the time.

TC And then *Life Magazine* did that article about nineteen young artists, and you were one of the featured artists in the article.

YOUNG AMERICANS CONTINUED

Franklin Boggs, 35
Born in Indiana, Boggs went to school in Philadelphia, was a war artist and is a resident artist at Beloit College, Wis.

Aleta Cornelius, 28
Miss Cornelius, married to ex-ski trooper, has young daughter, is teaching at a YWCA in Pittsburgh, her home town.

Eldzier Cortor, 34
A native of Richmond, Va., Cortor studied in Chicago and won a Guggenheim Fellowship to paint in West Indies.

Frank Duncan Jr., 34
Born in Chicago, Ill., Duncan went to Yale art school, was a war artist and has since won several Guggenheim awards.

Hazard Durfee, 34
Also a graduate of art school at Yale, Durfee was born in Rhode Island, during the war was Army camouflage artist.

Here are the 19 artists

At some time during their lives these 19 young people, whose paintings LIFE has shown, gave up the American dream of making a fortune and decided to paint pictures. To keep themselves going while they painted, they made frames, taught school, took jobs as welders, shoeshine boys, glass grinders and advertising agents, won scholarships to study both here and abroad. What do they have to show for their efforts so far?

Plainly they have learned their trade well. All skilled technicians, they have assimilated both the technical innovations of the European moderns and the traditional American methods of factual reporting. The results, though derivative in some cases, are not slavish imitations. In many of their paintings, however, the techniques seem almost too perfect, as the emotions of the artist fail to rise above the mechanics of production. Though the feelings are unmistakably there, they often lack the deep convictions of maturity. The painter, a little overconscious of himself and his medium, has tried too hard and too seriously to deliver his message.

Despite their self-consciousness and immaturity, it is an encouraging sign that these young painters do have something to say about the world around them—the romance of a city in the moonlight, the bustle of an oil field, the forlornness of the slums, the treachery of the enemies of liberty. As it stands now, the work of the young Americans is vigorous, exciting and rich in variety and experimentation. What remains for them is to achieve the balance between technique and emotion that lifts a painting to the stature of greatness.

Dean Ellis, 28
Born in Detroit, Ellis began exhibiting at 18, was an infantryman in the Pacific. He has won several regional prizes.

Stephen Greene, 31
Winner of the Prix de Rome fellowship last year, Greene grew up and studied in New York, has taught in Midwest.

Joseph Lasker, 30
A New Yorker, Lasker works full time for a TV service company, has just won the Prix de Rome fellowship for 1950.

Edward Melcarth, 35
Born in Kentucky, Melcarth grew up in Europe. From there he went to Harvard and is now teaching in New York.

Kenneth Nack, 27
Nack, a Chicagoan, was artist for Air Force during war. He has done industrial murals in Midwest, now lives near Paris.

Bernard Perlin, 31
A Southerner, Perlin studied in New York, painted in Poland on a scholarship, was an artist-reporter in Near East.

Alton Pickens, 33
Born in Seattle, Pickens has won scholarships on the West Coast, has exhibited in New York, now teaches in Indiana.

Hubert Ranoke, 25
A native of Buffalo, Ranoke has painted there all his life except for four years of service in the Pacific with the Marines.

Siegfried Reinhardt, 24
Born in East Prussia, Reinhardt moved to St. Louis in 1928. Self-taught, he studied art by copying Old Masters.

Honoré Sharrer, 29
Born in West Point, N.Y., she was taught how to draw by her mother, went on to art school at Yale, married a professor.

Theodoros Stamos, 27
Of Greek descent, Stamos was brought up in New York. To pay for art school, he worked as a florist and a hat blocker.

Hedda Sterne, 34
Born in Romania, Miss Sterne studied art in Paris. She came to New York in 1941, married a cartoonist, Saul Steinberg.

Edward Stevens, Jr., 27
Born in New Jersey, Stevens (cover) started exhibiting at 20, teaches in Newark, N.J., spent last summer in Africa.

Howard Warshaw, 29
A New Yorker, Warshaw has designed stage sets, has taught art therapy to veterans, now lives and teaches in California.

Photocopy of a page in the article "Nineteen Young American Artists" featured in the March 20, 1950 issue of *Life Magazine*. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

EC Oh yeah! I don't think I was in the country when that came out.

TC You weren't here at the time? Were you in the Caribbean? I have a copy of the article over here from 1950. It's this: "Nineteen Young American Artists." (*shows Eldzier a photocopy of the* Life Magazine *issue*) Did you notice a change after that? Did you have people looking for you or for your work?

EC I think very few people ever *came out* of that group.

TC I think you were the person.

EC This painting is in the Boston Museum of Fine Art. (*pointing at an image of* The Room No. V (1948) *in the magazine copy*) They used to have wallpaper made up of old paper and magazines. So if you look, there are a lot of different things collaged in the painting. In my work, there are a lot different things going on: collage, drawing, painting. This one here [*Room No. V*] is really painted. But it's not that I saw it. It's visual. I made that up like I'm writing a novel. And I write this up: the cat here, the birds, this little letter here… I'm making that up as I go along.

The Room No. V, 1948. Oil on Masonite, 34 x 27 in. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY. © Eldzier Cortor

TC It's all narrative. So the '40s and '50s were good times in New York for you in terms of being really productive. You painted so much at that point.

EC Oh yeah! I still do paintings as a matter of fact.

TC Which is amazing. Well, we do have all your prints here, so maybe we could look at them. Let's start with some your prints from Haïti and the abattoir [slaughterhouse] series.

EC Is that the Japanese print one? Yeah this is a Japanese print [*L'Abbatoire*, ca. 1950] . On the back of it you can see it's Japanese paper. They used to have a Nelson-Whitehead paper at the art store on Third Avenue, Central Art Supplies. They have the paper section upstairs. They might still have this Japanese paper.

L'Abbatoire, ca. 1950. Color woodblock on cream wove paper, 22 x 14 1/2 in. Art Institute Chicago, Gift of the artist in memory of Sophia Cortor. © Eldzier Cortor

TC What attracted you to this? Because the subject is a slaughterhouse, a theme you worked with again and again.

EC When I was in Haïti for my Guggenheim Fellowship there was another African-American artist there named Harlan Jackson. [He was awarded the Abraham Rosenberg Traveling Fellowship in 1948.] We were walking around and we stopped off at a market. They had this iron, architectural dome, like a big amphitheater. You know in Europe, sometimes they have those big plazas where they have those markets with lots of stalls. And this is where they slaughtered the cattle. It's like in Mexico in those little towns, you see the cow going through... And they're gonna slaughter two or three steers. And that's the same thing here. (*pointing at the print*) It's blood and bones; very basic. And everyone is naked, killing the steers. And then they hang the carcass up. You see some of them in this print. Can I see the other one, too, there? That's a real etching, that one is.

TC So did you keep going back to do—

EC Yeah, I wanted to do a series on that. This print, [*L'Abbatoire* (ca. 1950)], is a woodcut. And this one [*L'Abbatoire III* (1980)] is an etching. Bring it over here. I think I ran through this with you, we talked about this one here. Run your hand across [the surface of the print]. You feel the texture?

L'Abbatoire III, 1980. Soft ground etching and aquatint, with flat bite, in black and red on white wove paper, 22 1/4 x 30 in. Art Institute Chicago. © Eldzier Cortor

TC Yes!

EC If you look at the back it's embossed.

TC It actually has the impression.

EC And this is really a plate that is bitten through, the copper plate. And this area is painted out with asphalt. The plate is first bitten out and then I put asphalt in the parts I didn't want the acid to bite anymore. Then I paint that in. It's like a series of paintings. And I keep painting more and biting down. And after a while I don't paint anymore. That's when this drops out. It's bitten through. Do you see the edges? It's not cut out. If it happens to bite through, I just leave it. That's an accident. But it's not something that's just there. It's just bitten through. Imagine a thick copper plate being bitten down by a series of acid baths. So with this biting down you're taking a chance of destroying your plate if you intend to have a real tight drawing or something like that. You know what I mean? You're not gonna have it. So I made use of the accidents. It's like Jackson Pollock with the spilling. There was a method to his madness. All the while he was doing it he could explain it, you see.

TC Well, one of the amazing things about your work, over so many decades, is that you move back and forth from abstraction to realism. That was very natural for you.

EC 'Cause if you look at that painting [*Lady with Red Piano*], there are abstract areas. See the background? The paint sits up. If you look at those strokes and things made with the palette knife, and the different colors, that could be a painting itself. But anyway, getting back here [to the print]. I made use of whatever paper I could use. Paper plays a big part of the process of printing. The paper could take embossment, you see. It won't push through. You always have to keep your paper damp. This one here (*pointing at another print*), I think I did another etching of the abattoir using a different technique.

TC Yeah we could look at that as well. So tell us about this one [*L'Abbatoire No. VI* (ca. 1950)].

L'Abbatoire No. VI, ca. 1950–1960. Woodcut on paper, 40 1/2 x 29 in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum. © Eldzier Cortor

EC This copper plate was really bitten through. And you could feel it right there [on the paper].

TC If you look at the back you can feel the relief—

EC It's embossed. And it's got three different levels. You roll with maybe three colors. First you put a color and then clean the plate off. And it leaves the color that is stuck down into the crevices. Then the printer rolls a hard roller and then rolls a soft roller. And that's very good for Abstract Expressionism, abstract work, where you're just getting colors and whatnot. But you see, I wanted this to be more controlled. So I'm fighting between control and letting nature take its course.

TC Well, you could feel that, especially in the edges.

EC There are parts I let work out with the acid. If it bites through, it bites through. But that thing really sparkles at nighttime; it takes a glow, a light. It looks like a flashlight.

TC It has a reflective quality.

EC Yeah, because the acid is biting… As a matter of fact, I don't think they use that acid anymore. You used to be able to buy it in New York. I used to go to the chemical place and get a jug of acid. But with all these explosives and terrorist stuff going on today, I don't know if they even sell that stuff anymore. Like this morning I went to the art store and they had paints, but everything is acrylic now.

TC Well, you found your subjects in Haïti, but you did your prints when you got back to New York?

EC Oh yeah! Definitely.

TC Did you do sketches down there?

EC Oh yeah. I had a couple shows there, too, at the Haïtian museum [The National Museum of Art]. I'm in their collection, as a matter of fact. They bought one of my paintings. I also taught at the Centre d'Art. I don't know what happened to those places after the earthquake. [The Centre d'Art collapsed during the earthquake.] I did some paintings while I was there. I think Rosenfeld has a couple of paintings from that period. There was one with a couple in the bed with the mosquito netting.

TC Oh, I know that image [*The Couple* (ca. 1948)].

The Couple, ca. 1948. Oil on Masonite, 28" x 22". Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. © Eldzier Cortor

EC The one with two heads.

TC Yes. For something like this, the abattoir, would you have done any sketches or abstract sketches?

EC No I didn't do sketches of the abattoir. I just did the prints for that one.

TC So it was all from memory?

EC No, I think I took photographs of that iron dome and the abattoir. It looked like a railroad station from the nineteenth century. Haïti was very influenced by the French there, architecturally. And the statues are very classical. And the language, too, the patois, Creole—I spoke the folk language there. It was the same in the Sea Islands too. You would think you were in another country the way the Gullah people spoke. If you ever go down there, you'll see. But now I think they're building tennis courts and whatnot on the islands. Developers bought up all the land.

And forget about planes. In those days you didn't catch planes. Even coming back from Haïti, the last time I was in Haïti, I came back in a little tiny boat.

TC Oh really?

EC I was with Harlan Jackson. We were caught in a storm. The boat cost me twenty-five dollars. And we were the crew.

TC You worked for your passage.

EC And that boat hit St. Nicholas Moat [a water passage in the Caribbean sea]. The current is going this way and that way. I thought the boat was gonna go down. And it had cottonseed on it. And the boat was getting wet. So that was an adventure. Now people just catch a plane to travel.

I went to Cuba first by boat. This is before Castro. I caught a train from Havana down to Santiago. I rode across the Camagüey Province and different regions. It's the funniest thing. When the train stops at the station, people meet you, they have food, and they hand it to you. They reach out the window with a bottle of wine.

TC But you didn't set out to Haïti with Harlan Jackson. Did you meet him there?

EC I met him in Haïti. But I was in Cuba first. I went to Jamaica, but didn't stay very long. I think I stayed about a day or so. And then I went to Haïti from there. And they loved me there. I could have stayed there the rest of my life.

TC Did you have a contact before you arrived there? Or did you just show up there?

EC I just showed up there. I knew Jackson and he was at the airport.

TC So he met you there.

EC He was at the airport. He was putting someone on the plane there.

TC And that's where you met him?

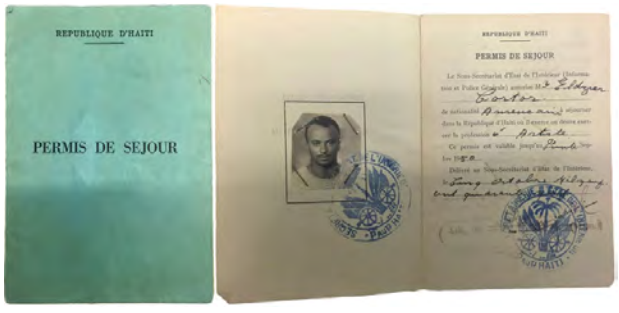
EC Yeah, that's how I met Jackson. And Janet Jackson [his wife] ended up living in the Hamptons there. I think he married again. He married some Ross or something like that. Susan Gardner I think is her name. She's still around, I think. I don't correspond with them.

TC But you just met him accidentally.

EC Yeah, and he had his girlfriend with him. He had a place up in the town of Leclerc. [Philippe Leclerc de Hautecloque] was a general in Napoleon's army. He used to live up there, [and they named the area after him]. It was very French in Haïti. I never went to the Citadel, though. I think Jackson went up there on horseback. I went to some other areas though, like Jacmel. But it's like roughing it out there, 'cause the French—they don't build roads. The Romans built roads as they went along so they were able to conquer regions. But the French in Haïti, they didn't build roads. Like Vietnam, the French didn't build any roads there either. If you notice North Vietnam, South Vietnam, they had to go through the jungle.

TC So how did you make that connection with the Centre d'Art?

EC Well, I landed there, but I was gonna come back 'cause I was broke. And then I met Jackson. He was going back to San Francisco with his girlfriend to get married. There was this art group in San Francisco, too, at the time. Like New York had a group of artists, different regions had their own little groups. So I made a deal with him. I said, "Look, I don't have much money right now. Why don't you stay with me until I get my second installment?" Because they didn't pay you all at once...



Eldzier's "Permis de Séjour" or residency permit for Haïti, 1950. Courtesy of

TC This was the Guggenheim?

EC Yes, the Guggenheim. It was fifty dollars a week. The Rosenwald was like twenty-five dollars a week. Now, that was a lot of money at the time.

TC Especially in Haïti.

EC Their currency is in gourdes. One gourde would be ten, twenty cents, or whatever it was in American money. And you could live very cheaply up in the hills there—and by candlelight, too.

TC No electricity.

EC After a while I invested in a lamp.

TC Big shot. (*laughter*) An oil lamp though?

EC Yeah. And the shower was outside. There was grass on top of the huts that we lived in, up in the hills in Leclerc.

TC I love it.

EC I don't know if you've ever lived in the tropics, but they have grass huts; a grass ceiling up at the top there and these little lizards crawling around. They'd be chasing one another all day long. (*laughter*) Outside you would have a big barrel to catch the rainwater—that would be your bath water. And then for drinking water I would take one of those jugs like that (*points to a jug in his apartment*), and go down to the well.

TC You would take your clay jug down to the well?

EC And get some water to drink. I would walk up the road there. It'd be a gathering of people, too, selling things or just hanging around.

TC Did any of your colleagues from Chicago go to Haïti as well?

EC Later on they went.

TC Did they wonder why you wanted to go?

EC Well, it was the history of Haïti. I met some people in Washington, DC that got me interested in Haïti. I wanted to be there for my fellowship, you see. They liked me in Haïti. When I went to check out and turn in my passport, they said, "You want to stay?"

TC They would have let you.

EC I would meet them again in New York, years later, too. 'Cause they would have these so-called revolutions and people would have to leave.

TC They had to escape the violence.

EC When I was there they had some type of revolution [the Minister of Interior and Defense became the military ruler of Haïti]. Bon Papa [Paul Magloire] I think his name was. Not this other guy recently that they called Baby-Doc. I wasn't there during that time. When I was in Cuba, it seems that these marines urinated on [the statue of José Martí]. They banned the marines from Havana because of this incident.

TC It was a pretty unstable time.

EC I liked Cuba very much, and the food, too. And the social mores of the Cubans, the restaurants… They'd have like a table out in the restaurant where you'd be sitting in the dining room, and they'd have a series of booths. A guy would come in with his girlfriend; he'd pull back the curtain and go in there. And they would pull the curtain back. (*laughter*) I always remember that situation. But wow, those rice and beans—I remember that still today. They

had a Chinese Cuban spot, too, down there.

TC It's changed. So let's look at some of your more recent prints.

EC These are figure studies more or less. That's a woodcut you have there. (*points at a print*)

TC This one is wonderful too. This is you just happily working in abstraction again [*Trio/Assemblage I* (ca. 1950)]. But that's a figure though, right?

EC Yeah. It's a woodcut. I used the Japanese method of rice paper and rice water—a lot of rice.

Trio Assemblage I, ca. 1950. Woodcut, 14 3/16 × 21 13/16 in. Whitney Museum of American Art. © Eldzier Cortor

TC Rice water for treating the paper?

EC And mixing with the colors, too.

TC This is very beautiful, the torso here.

EC I think the Whitney owns that one. [*Trio/Assemblage I*]

TC So how spontaneous was this composition? Did you plan it ahead?

EC Oh, no. This is a figure composition in the nude. I always liked the figure. It truly is my basic approach. I always go back to nude figures. I've had whole shows of just nude figures. This one here is the female figure [*Dance Figure II* (1989)]. This is a mezzotint. You know you make a mezzotint with a rocker. It's a whole series of cross-hatching back and forth till the plate gives you that *black*. Then you take a burin and then you can get gradations through the black.

Dance Figure II, 1989. Etching on cream paper, 22 1/4 x 15 in. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. © Eldzier Cortor

TC So what makes you choose mezzotint for something like this?

EC I just wanted to try that method of etching.

TC You get beautiful modeling with mezzotint.

EC I was interested in printmaking. Not silkscreen, I didn't care for silkscreen. But the woodcut, that's the basic thing. At Columbia University there was a German fellow teaching woodcut printing. He had a different way of holding a knife. And I tackled the wood plate with his style, you see. For Japanese woodblocks, he used another type of knife. Now this here is a mezzotint [*Jewels/Theme III* (1985)]. It is really a couple of plates: there's a plate with color here and a key plate here. This is bitten through, you see.

Jewels, Theme III, 1985. Mezzotint, 30 x 22 1/2 in. Brooklyn Museum. © Eldzier Cortor

TC So you used successive plates for this print.

EC Yeah. This one is more abstract. As you said I do venture back and forth. I could still say this is abstract or this is African. If you go to the African [art galleries] of a museum they have a lot of those things. The designs have meaning. To me this is just a design, but to them this could mean something else. So there is a method. You know it's very hard for me to go back and review this stuff here, because I'm not into this anymore.

TC You've moved on.

EC Those were nice days though, the '60s and '70s. At that time the city was under siege. So I would go to the studio in the evening and wouldn't come out at night. I would just stay in the printshop [Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop] all night long.

TC What do you mean the city was under siege?

EC Well, there was all kinds of crap going on: anti-war protests, the muggings, all types of stuff.

TC So you took refuge in the studio. That was a smart thing to do. This is another beauty [*L'Abbatoire I* (ca. 1950)].

EC This is a Japanese print here. I worked on this in my kitchen at home. I didn't work on it in the studio. Michael, my son, was a little kid then.

TC So you actually did your woodblock printing at home?

EC Yeah, and you could with the right knife. I think there's one print I made that's at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It's a little, tiny print. It's about six inches. It's called *Man with Overcoat* (1937). It's just a little man with an overcoat; a little linoleum cut.

TC So the etchings you would have done in the studio.

L'Abbatoire I, ca. 1950. Color woodblock on cream wove paper, 21 3/4 x 17 in. Art Institute Chicago. © Eldzier Cortor

EC Oh yeah, 'cause there's acid and all that stuff you have to have. But the mezzotint I did at home—you work on a dry plate. I had a rocker and I'd set it up. So what happened, by rocking that thing, I built some kind of a large bump on my hand. But usually a mezzotint is about six inches in size. People do little mezzotints. But I think a mezzotint is like an engraving. You take the tool and dig through the thing. But this one here [*L'Abbatoire I*] is a woodcut. Like I said, I made this at home.

TC It is very beautiful.

EC You have to keep the paper damp and you have to use things like formaldehyde to prevent mold from setting in on the paper.

TC You mixed formaldehyde in with your moisture?

EC Yeah, I would blanch it with a blank piece of newspaper to keep mold from setting. I had to go to drug stores to get formaldehyde, which is a poison, and you have to get permission to use that. As I said, there were a lot of chemicals like nitric acid and things like that.

So if you look closely, this looks like watercolor. (*pointing at* L'Abbatoire I) But it's really tints of color. Nothing is white or mixed in. Like Japanese prints are really tints. They're not opaque like tempera colors with white in there. And this is where the paper comes through. If you look at Japanese prints, the paper comes through. Three or four different people had their hand in this one thing. And this method here would entail Japanese printmaking.

TC Have you ever gone to Japan?

EC No, I've never been to Japan. My teacher who was a master printmaker, he was Japanese. He taught at Pratt in 1958.

TC When you were there?

EC Yeah. I was the only one who stayed in the class. They all dropped out. There was another Japanese boy; he stayed. It was just the two of us. Sekino was the teacher's name [the leading post-war Japanese printmaker Jun'ichiro Sekino]. The Japan Society invited him to come

here. You know these classes, kids drop out. Things get tough. The techniques are too hard.

TC Who were some of the printmakers that inspired you?

EC Oh, lots of printmakers... Stanley William Hayter started Atelier 17 in Paris.

TC The Brooklyn Museum has lots of Hayters in its collection.

EC He came here during the war [WWII], to this country. That place [Atelier 17 in New York] was an offshoot of Hayter's studio in Paris. Most of the people that were there had been in Paris and studied with Hayter.

TC Did you meet Hayter yourself?

Eldzier Cortor with his wife and son Michael, ca. 1955. Courtesy of Michael Cortor.

EC When I went to Paris I visited the workshop, but he wasn't there. He was painting or something. There was an Indian fellow there. I forget his name. He came here, too, that fellow. Anyway, I'm always interested in seeing how my prints are holding up, you know the colors and things like that—things changing around. You know the paper changes, like the newspapers you have at home.

TC Yeah, but you use beautiful paper.

EC I'm just very conscious of the materials I use, even in my paintings.

TC Who are the artists you've most enjoyed looking at over the course of your career? I remember you said that Thomas Hart Benton was really important to you.

EC Oh Benton. Well, Benton had astigmatism. And his things were much more like El Grecos. I have astigmatism, too. If you notice these prints I elongate things. I think of things in long shapes. Same thing with [*Southern Landscape*], the frame is long. You see that frame? And things gear themselves to that. Same thing here, too, it's not a square. It's like a corny phrase. (*laughter*) It's elongated. You see that piano [in *Lady with Piano*]? It's elongated.

TC Who else did you like looking at when you were coming up as an artist?

EC You mean the painters I liked? I was in the museum building, you know at the time, at the Art Institute of Chicago. They had a Soutine. Oh yeah! And Delacroix. I was fascinated with those paintings. I loved the French classical painters.

TC You spent a lot of time in the French galleries?

EC Yeah. They had a place here that went out of business where you could see those paintings. Dahesh? You remember the Dahesh Museum of Art? It was located in downtown Manhattan.

TC Oh Dahesh, yes it's still around, but that collection is not on view anymore.

EC I know!

TC So you enjoyed nineteenth century French painting?

EC Yeah, Jacques Louis David as I've said. It was an interesting period, too—literature-wise and everything.

TC Absolutely. Were you meeting a lot of young writers at the time? I know you knew Gwendolyn Brooks in Chicago.

EC I knew Caresse Crosby, [co-founder of Black Sun Press, which published expatriate writers in Paris in the '20s and '30s].

TC Oh she's very interesting. Did you know her well?

EC Yeah, very well. She owned a picture of mine in Washington.

TC Did she really? How did you meet her?

EC Well, it was after the war [late '40s]. In Washington, DC we had a whole bunch of people and they would have get-togethers, parties, shows... things like that. I met Peggy Guggenheim. I knew her very well, too.

TC Really? Where did you meet her?

EC In DC and here in New York, too. As I said, I couldn't go back to Chicago. (*laughter*) It's like going back to a little small town. Yeah, I knew Peggy Guggenheim when she had the gallery on 57th Street.

TC The Art of This Century Gallery.

EC And it was like a whole story of people up here in New York. It just took off. And then Jackson Pollock came along. And Peggy was very much into Jackson Pollock, too, as a matter of fact.

TC So when you were doing this kind of abstraction in the abattoir series, were you interested in what was going on in abstraction at the time?

EC Oh no, like I said, I didn't follow that group. That was the crowd at the Cedar Bar. I visited once. There was a fellow I knew. His name was Paul Georges. I don't know if you've ever heard of him?

TC I've heard of him.

EC He died in France. He and I used to be buddies, and he went to the Cedar Bar. He said he'd go down there just to mend fences. You know to meet artists and shake hands with Jackson Pollock or somebody over there. It was a place where you could meet people or be made.

TC How about Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence? Did you know them?

EC Well, it was more fragmented in New York. The black artists were more together in

Chicago. Typical of New York City though, you could live right next door to one another, but they wouldn't come visit you. That was the typical New York scene.

TC It was more about the community in Chicago.

EC And also visiting people. I used to drop in on people there. You don't just drop in on somebody here. You have to call and make an appointment. But in Chicago artists just rang your bell and dropped in. And that was then, I don't know how it is now. (*pointing to Michael Cortor, his son*) We were there recently. This guy said, "You can't go back." What was the name of that writer?

TC Thomas Wolfe [*You Can't Go Home Again* (1940)]. I just have one more photo to show you, because we found this picture of *Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)*. It was at The Downtown Gallery. It was an exhibition with Jacob Lawrence's paintings. This is, I think, in '41.

EC Oh yeah, at The Downtown Gallery.

Installation view of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series* with Cortor's *Southern Gate (Southern Flood)*, at the Downtown Gallery in 1941. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

TC Did you see that exhibition?

EC Yeah, this is when they were introducing Jacob Lawrence. Edith Halpert was going to make him a star. She had a whole array of artists: Ben Shahn, Charles Sheeler—different people. She also paid them a stipend or something like that.

TC A retainer of some kind?

EC Something like that. She would get businesses to hang paintings in their offices. And the businesses would then buy more paintings. But she would give the artists money right away. She would arrange something so that the IRS wouldn't zoom in on them and collect the whole array. You come into fifty thousand dollars all of a sudden on a painting, the government moves in on you. Well, she didn't have that. She would have you on a salary or some kind of arrangement. And Jacob Lawrence was coming under her wing, you see.

TC Can you say a word about Selden Rodman, since he owned this picture early on [*Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)*]? Did you meet him before or after you went to Haïti?

EC Oh we exchanged letters in Chicago.

TC Before you went to Haïti?

EC Yeah.

TC 'Cause he knew a lot about Haïti.

EC Well, I was exhibiting somewhere and he wrote to me. He sent me his book. He was a real poet, Selden Rodman. When we were exchanging letters, he had seen my paintings and compared me to Vermeer for some reason or another. At the time I was visiting DC, I had just been rejected from the draft—some kind of affliction. So I could go anywhere. Before that I was really tied up. I didn't know whether I was going to be drafted or not. Rodman just got out of the navy or the army.

TC And Rodman was interested in Haïti as well?

EC As a matter of fact, yes. I didn't know that at that time, but later on I guess he went to Haïti. But I didn't know he was in Haïti. I never saw him there. He was playing tennis or something like that.

TC (*laughter*)

EC But I knew Dewitt Peters there, head of the Centre d'Art. He hired me as a teacher. They had this sculptor there, a guy by the name of Jason Seley. I don't know if you've ever heard of him. He took chrome bumpers and made sculptures out of them. Chase Bank, the one on Wall Street, they have one of his sculptures.

TC It's a welded sculpture?

EC Yeah, and he welded a bunch of bumpers together into some kind of abstract thing. He was teaching in Haïti and I took over for him.

But you know what? Harlan and I didn't care for the American tourist. We stayed away from the American tourist. I don't know how we divorced ourselves from the American tourists there, you know. They were squares, as you see 'em there, coming through. But we were like the people who lived there. So otherwise, with my class at the Centre d'Art, I would maybe have a chair with an apple, a pineapple, or avocados, or something with a cloth. I'd set up a still life. I would even have a nude girl come in—talk her into getting out of her clothes. And she'd pose for the class. They had a Jeep and we would load up the class, go up into the hills or down to the market place—the market place where the abattoir was. And I would set up some easels and then they would paint the scene there.

TC What other traveling did you do?

EC I went to Oaxaca, Mexico. D.H. Lawrence lived there. And I drove from Chicago.

TC What were you doing there?

EC Just driving through. I saw Elizabeth Catlett there.

TC I was going to ask you!

EC She was living there. And she was married to another fellow there.

TC Wasn't she married to Charles White?

EC Well, she divorced him. And that was a scandal at the time, too. And then she married another guy in Mexico. Then she had a child with him and had a family in Mexico. And then I dropped in on her [in the '50s, early '60s].

TC So what was that like? Was that the first time you met her?

EC No, I knew her from Chicago. She went to the Art Institute of Chicago in the early days. And she was at the SSCAC, too. At the time, a lot of people heard what was going on in Chicago and dropped in. As I said, the artists in Chicago were very welcoming. If you needed a room you could shack up at the Art Center.

TC So she was doing prints when you visited her in Mexico or was she doing more sculpture?

EC She was doing sculpture at the time. When Charles and Elizabeth broke up you could never speak his name to her. Then I met her later on in Washington DC. They had some kind of

show at the Smithsonian, I think some years ago.

TC A lot of people visited her in Mexico, didn't they? It was like an adventure to go see her. And your work is as visible as Catlett's now. I was just in Boston at the Museum of Fine Arts and in one of the twentieth century galleries there were three of your paintings.

EC Oh yeah. You know what? I was so glad that they put it together.

TC Three! You had a whole wall.

EC Yeah. (*laughter*) I'm so glad they liked the paintings.

TC Well, I was looking at them pretty closely and a couple of those pictures have the areas where you did like a collage of—

EC —memorabilia.

TC Memorabilia, newspapers, and magazines that you clearly chose very carefully.

EC As a matter of fact, somebody deciphered what that picture was in that magazine: [The Journal of the American Medical Association November 12, 2012]. If you look at it, you'll see.

TC So were these things you just invented?

EC No, those are real things from my memory as a kid that I hold onto; that are precious to me. That pinball machine for instance [in *Still Life: Past Revisited* (1973)], as a kid at the candy store, once the ball went in the hole in that pinball machine, the woman would give you some candy. It was a little old lady that ran the candy store. And you know what? As a kid we would lift the machine up.

TC Ah!! Tilt! (*laughter*)

EC And we won so much candy. She'd come around and look down at the machine, but we had it on the floor already.

TC I love it. You have a fan here that says, "Madame C.J. Walker" on it.

EC Yeah. [She was an entrepreneur and had her own hair line company for black women, which rivaled that of Annie Malone's Poro Company.]

TC You said that a lot of the things are from your childhood, but these are not things you necessarily had.

Still-Life: Past Revisited, 1973. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. © Eldzier Cortor

EC It's like *Citizen Kane*.

TC Right. So they're not things you kept, they're just all recalled. And what about this stack of chairs?

EC Chairs are important. Look at us. When you walk in here this is my Archie Bunker chair.

TC (*laughter*)

EC Remember that chair? They have it at the Smithsonian.

TC Yes, I know.

EC Chairs are very important in life. I know when you go to your place you have a favorite chair, don't you?

TC I absolutely do. But these chairs go all the way up. Was there any particular reason why you stacked them up?

EC No, different styles at first, and I used furniture a lot in my paintings. That's a Victorian dresser. You see the dresser there?

TC And you have different dressers in a lot of your paintings.

EC During the Depression, they had what you called the Catholic Salvage. That's when during the Depression a lot of wealthy people, who lived in those Victorian houses, lost their money. And the Salvation Army, or the Catholic Salvage at the time, would come in and take all this donated old furniture. So that's where a lot of artists would go down and get things for their houses. And Chicago had loads of Victorian houses with those tables and the Big Ben clock, you know generic items.

TC And how about the Hampton University banner, is that what it is?

EC Yeah that's a school there in Virginia near Washington DC.

TC Any particular reason you put that in? I'm about to go there on Thursday to see the collection.

EC It used to be a hangout, too. I used to go to Washington and Howard University. Sometimes they would hold a little welcome house thing there. And Mrs. Roosevelt would visit the galleries there, too, at Howard University.

TC Did she?

EC She was very progressive.

TC Yeah, very. Did you ever go to the Corcoran while you were there?

EC Yeah. It's no longer there is it? It went out of business.

TC Well, they've moved the collection to the National Gallery. The building will be used for the art school connected with George Washington University. So did you go to all the monuments?

EC Oh yeah, in Washington, that's a treat there. And the museums, wow! I love those museums there.

TC So were there any contemporary, commercial galleries that you went to early on in Washington?

EC I think the Phillips Gallery [now the Phillips Collection] was the one I went to. One fellow on Dupont Circle—his name was Whyte—he had a gallery. Anyway, it's not like New York City. That's why I ended up coming to New York.

TC Now did you go to California when you were younger? Did you ever visit?

EC Oh yeah. My mother was there. She lived in L.A.

TC Oh wow!

EC (*Eldzier shows a photo of his mother*) She's 103 in this photo. As a kid I remember when I was in art school, a teacher took us down to the Brookfield Zoo. And we saw giraffes and all that stuff. And some school kids were coming by with their teachers. And they said, "Oh look at the poor artist."

TC It's the only kind there is.

EC (*laughter*) You always hear the story of the starving artist. And that's what people thought of me. 'Cause when you think of an artist you don't think of wealth. Now, of course you think of it with Jackson Pollock's work going for millions of dollars.

TC And even twenty-year-old artists today…

EC (*shows a picture of his mother)* That's my mother there. She's from Virginia. And she looks white there, doesn't she?

TC Yeah.

EC But she's black. She's got Cherokee in her, too.

TC Interesting. When did you move to Chicago from Virginia?

EC I was born in 1916. So they moved in 1918.

Eldzier Cortor's mother, Ophelia Cortor (left), with his wife Sofia (right), ca. 1990. Courtesy of Michael Cortor.

TC So you were very little when they moved?

EC Yes, I saved my father from going to war, as a matter of fact.

TC How'd you do that?

EC Because they didn't take you into the army if you had a child, you know. Now they take the whole family.

TC Do you know why they moved to Chicago?

EC Well, I guess it was time to go. I don't know.

TC Their relatives were in Chicago?

EC No their relatives were in Virginia. I didn't have any relatives in Chicago. That's what we called the Great Migration. I hate to use that term, 'cause they always show them with baskets on their head. But no, they just decided to come to Chicago, 'cause at that time Chicago was a swinging place.

TC No question. Did you ever get thrown off track in your career or did you just work steadily your whole life?

EC Oh when I get hooked into something—I used to worked all night long.

TC Really?

EC Yeah. I did a lot of all-night-long paintings.

TC So did you do that for a long time, working at night?

EC Oh yes, because at nighttime no one knocks at your door—I had no distractions.

TC It's just you and your picture.

EC There's something about nightlife, you know what I mean? I'd have the radio on, or I'd put a record on or something. They had records in those days.

TC I remember records.

EC No CDs, just the records. And I did prints at the workshop. As I said, New York was dangerous in the '70s. I wouldn't come out in the street at night. (*laughter*) I'd go into the workshop with my plates and my prints, and things to print etchings. Back then I was into etchings, which I did a whole bunch of at nighttime. And then I'd come out in the morning.

TC You would just stay in the studio.

EC It'd be the night people who worked there, too. Some people were doing editions for themselves; some were doing editions for other people. I did editions for myself, as a matter of fact.

I really was basically a night person, 'cause it's hard for me to get up. I sleep till around ten o'clock or something like that. Unless I have an appointment, then I'll get up at six o'clock. You know like today, I got up at six o'clock. But I'm really just basically a night person. I don't know if you yourself—

TC I tend to be a night person.

Ophelia Cortor, ca. 1920. Courtesy of Michael Cortor.

EC The Village used to be—you'd come out and meet people at nighttime on the street, especially artists. They had Delaney—I don't know if you've heard of Beauford Delaney?

TC Yeah absolutely.

EC And then he went off to Paris. Rosenfeld has a bunch of his paintings.

TC Did you ever meet him?

EC Oh yeah! I met him in the Village there and he took me out. We went down to the Museum of Modern Art and then came down to the Village. I had a car so we drove down. And he set me up with a little dinner, I remember. And he showed at a gallery in the Village, I think at the time.

TC And what did you think of his work?

EC Yeah, well he did realistic things and then he went to Paris and became very abstract. He was very open. Especially when he went to Paris. He was gay, so that was—I think someone said that he felt at home [in Paris]. A fellow wrote a book about him. I didn't really know very much about him until I came to New York and started living here.

TC So who did you pal around with in Chicago's South Side, like who were your best buddies when you were out there?

EC Margaret Taylor-Burroughs, I don't know if you've ever heard of her. She is the one that stood out, and Marion Perkins, too. He visited me here in New York. He was a sculptor.

TC She did well. She had a good career, Margaret Burroughs. What about other artists that came after the war?

EC The Bauhaus artists came to Chicago and they were welcomed there.

TC Did you ever meet any of those artists?

EC Well, I went to the IIT Institute of Design for a while and studied with László Moholy-Nagy.

TC Did you really?

EC Oh yeah, for a while there.

TC What was that like?

EC Well, they didn't want you to have any type of art education; they put that in their catalog. They didn't want you to know about perspective or any principles.

TC They wanted a blank slate.

EC Yeah. They just wanted you to be *modern*. They wanted the executive-types to be modern. So they would send them to that school. And they would teach them how to be modern. I'm living in the age of, whatcha call it, the Internet. I don't know a damn thing about the Internet. (*laughter*)

TC And that's okay.

EC But you hear these people talk the "Internet" talk. You know three sentences, or one sentence, or one word. One word covers the whole thing. I don't think I can get any of that Internet stuff.

TC I think that's fine. I wish I didn't have to.

EC You know my letters. Have you ever gotten a letter from me?

TC They're beautiful.

EC I write like a composition.

TC Yes you do. It's like calligraphy.

EC Well, it has a composition to it. What do you call that, that had the hieroglyphics? The Rosetta Stone. Well, that's another age you see. You know what I mean?

TC So how long did you study with Moholy-Nagy at Arts and Design?

EC Oh I didn't study for too long. I mean I think it was a scholarship there. It was part of the

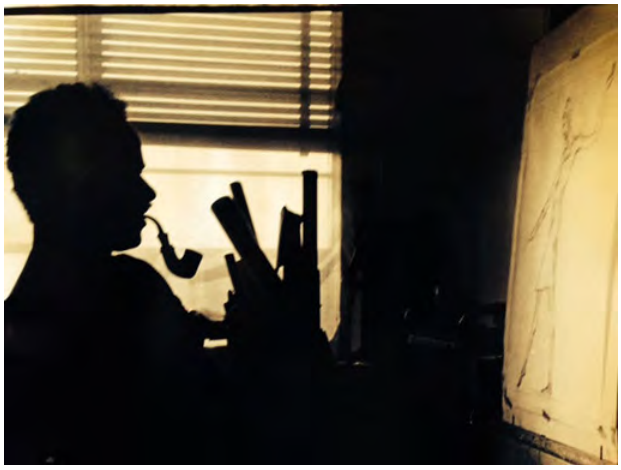
WPA.

TC So this is after Art Institute?

EC Oh yeah, way after [early '40s].

TC What made you take the class?

EC Well, because I knew and liked the people there. And it was just a nice place. You know up there, on the North Side. And they had a hangout spot up there; they had some places where all the artists would hang out. It was like the Cedar Bar in the Village.



Eldzier Cortor in his studio, ca. 1970. Courtesy of Michael Cortor.

TC Right.

EC Romano's I think they had up there, near Chez Paree. They would have cabaret. Sophie Tucker would sing—different people that were around those days. (*laughter*)

TC Do you have anything else to say about your first teachers?

EC Blackshear was more interesting than Helen Gardner. She would move her body or whatnot. But Gardner, if you listened to her when she gave a talk, you'd know she was really knowledgeable, you see. Just the composition of the words and the forwards—it was describing a work, you see. I was always into that composition, which is very important. I know now they use that word composition for phrasing and writing, or anything like that. I think that's a lost art.

TC Well, not entirely.

EC I still have this Oxford Dictionary, which I use to look up words every once in a while. And a lot words I look up don't exist.

TC I was in Washington recently at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. They have a little display of artist correspondence, and they had a group of things that were written to Kathleen Blackshear by various artists. And some them were Christmas cards, some of them were prints. It was interesting because you got to see the people she was in contact with.

EC I'm so glad for her because she was like my real buddy. And I know when I left home there—she was old, you see. I was at a restaurant in Chicago and I was going to New York for the first time. And she said, "Well it's a very professional city, New York."

I remember once in school, I was really despondent because I was washing dishes to pay for high school. I even washed dishes while I was going to the Art Institute. And students would come down and I'd be washing their dishes. One kid, his father owned an oil well in Texas somewhere. The kid had loads of brushes and things like that. I only had this one Chinese brush. And you know with a Chinese brush you can do really thin lines and fat lines, too. That was my brush in school. And as I mentioned, I was despondent to wash these dishes.

Blackshear said "Look,"—she had been in New York, she went to Columbia University—"you know what? In New York you'll find some of the finest, top artists waiting tables."

TC To get by.

EC You know like show biz people, they would wait tables while they're looking for a job. You know in the arts there, they'd get dishwashing jobs and things like that.

TC So she made you feel like you weren't alone.

EC Yeah, so that was part of it. She made me feel like I wasn't just painting and selling paintings.

TC Were you in touch with her once you moved to New York?

EC Oh yeah, we used to send Christmas cards to each other.

TC I wonder if any of your Christmas cards are in this collection. I should look and see.

EC You know what? It's the funniest thing. I was so grateful to her. I came to visit her one day and a fellow said to me, "She doesn't want to see you! Don't come around here."

TC That's terrible.

EC He said, "Because she's on to some other students now." You know what I mean? He felt that she had done her part with me. He said, "Don't hang around here anymore, you're on your own now."

TC It's a business, right.

EC Yeah, and that was it. That's what she told me, you see. But she remembered me, and then all those years I would send her Christmas cards, which I still write to people. I'm very grateful to the people that have done little things for me over the years. And once in while I get these—well they passed away, you see. You know what I mean?

TC Well, you're having a renaissance now.

EC That's really like a dessert, more or less. I hope you all have something like this. I still get around without that crutch once in a while. Outside I still have my little cane with me though. It gives me panache, you know, with the cane. (*laughter*) At the Art Institute of Chicago [for the exhibition *Eldzier Cortor Coming Home* (2015)], they gave me a wheelchair. I felt like the Queen of England, being rolled along. (*laughter*) These school kids came to visit the museum and a whole bunch of them came up to me. And I was in the room with my paintings. The woman rolling me around introduced me to the children. She said, "This is the real artist here. He did these paintings." They interviewed me, too, the little kids.

TC They must have loved it.