

## Seeing Eldzier Cortor

Eldzier Cortor died on Thanksgiving Day, 2015, about seven months after I interviewed him. He was ninety-nine years old. According to his son Michael, Cortor worked as an artist up until the day he died.

The *New York Times* ran a generous obituary of Cortor, which included a photograph of him, sitting upright and bow-tied, taken by the photojournalist Gordon Parks in 1949. This photograph presented Cortor just after winning a Guggenheim fellowship, which would take him to Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti. The *Times* also ran a front-page story titled “Black Artists and the March into the Museum,” in which Cortor was featured, and which included several short video-interviews with black artists.<sup>1</sup> An assessment of black art in the twentieth-century art market, the *Times* piece underscored a bittersweet irony in the age of modernist formalism during which Cortor and other artists developed their careers. If a black artist chose to work in a figurative mode, then his or her work was likely to be pigeonholed by the white establishment as expressive of the “black experience.” But if he or she chose to work in abstraction, then this work did not fit the category of “black art” as conceived by the country’s leading museums.

Has the art world caught up with the idea that modernism was many things? Cortor—whose range of work is difficult to classify—remained skeptical. In one of the videos that accompanied the *Times* piece, the interviewer suggests that Cortor is now finally getting “an immense amount of recognition.” Cortor gently interrupts: “Now you say that, you see. But I don’t know that, you see.”

*You see*: here is Cortor’s verbal tic. It struck me as appropriate. Seeing and being seen, of course, have provided dominant metaphors for understanding African American identity, from W. E. B. Du Bois’s concepts of visibility—including “the Veil” and “second-sight”—to one of the most memorable opening lines in American literature: “I am an invisible man,” says Ralph Ellison’s unnamed narrator in the novel of that name. The symbolism is clear: Will the complexity and range of black identity be acknowledged in American culture?

If Cortor is still an underappreciated artist, then the past few years have at least seen some high-profile recognition of Cortor's significance to the history of American art.<sup>2</sup> The 2015 inaugural show of the new downtown Whitney Museum—aptly titled “America is Hard to See”—included two of Cortor's detailed woodcuts among over six hundred artworks drawn from the museum's permanent collection. In these woodcuts—both titled *L'Abattoire* (1955–1958)—segments of deeply colored ink suggest human bodies, though the works do not necessarily allude to any specific scene of slaughter, as Cortor reminded me.

And yet, in the Whitney's new “A to Z” *Handbook of the Collection* (2016), Cortor's work does not appear. Perhaps his absence is unsurprising in a publication that was forced to limit the work of more than three thousand artists to 350 inside a portable softcover book.<sup>3</sup> But at the Whitney, I could not help reflecting on Cortor and the slow process of transforming the “white spaces” of art museums into welcoming and diverse public spheres.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the enormous new Whitney building designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano aims at inclusion—from the outdoor plaza on the ground floor to the many windows and open-air exhibition spaces that overlook the meatpacking district of New York. The nine-story cantilevered building—like a piece of sculpture itself—offers striking vistas of the Hudson River to the west, and in other directions a dense zone of restaurants, boutiques, galleries, and global *flâneurs* walking the High Line. The museum admirably extends itself into the neighborhood in which it has been built, but this area of Manhattan itself feels like a museum of expensive objects, where the traffic on 10th Avenue is itself an art installation, to be viewed from the High Line's stadium seats.

Perhaps the museums of Chicago will never feel quite so globally self-conscious, even inside the beautiful, light-filled Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), opened in 2009 and also designed by Renzo Piano. In early 2015, the AIC presented a focused exhibition of Cortor's prints titled “Eldzier Cortor Coming Home,” not in the Modern Wing but in a gallery within the museum's 1893 Beaux Arts building. To be sure, this is a building that Cortor knew well, a “home” in the sense that it was where Cortor trained to be a professional artist. Cortor enrolled as a full-time student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1935: he studied the museum's vast collection

and took revelatory courses in art history from Kathleen Blackshear, who exposed her students to both Western and African traditions of art and also encouraged visits to the nearby Field Museum of Natural History.<sup>5</sup> The AIC exhibition celebrated Cortor's technical virtuosity, including his skill with *intaglio*: a process by which a metal plate is carved with a sharp tool and incisions take ink; then the surface of the plate is wiped clean and dampened paper is pressed with a roller on top of the plate. An image is produced from sunken ink. Printmaking becomes fantastically modern through Cortor's modulations of vivid color, his play with forms that are neither figurative nor purely abstract.

This balance was also on display at a small show of Cortor's work in the fall of 2014, which took place at an historic institution in Chicago—the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC). The only surviving art center of the Works Progress Administration, the SSCAC was founded in 1940 by Cortor and his fellow artist and organizer Margaret Burroughs, with the help of numerous artists and intellectuals in Bronzeville. Cortor donated many works of art for this 2014 exhibition in order to support the center, which is still a grassroots organization despite its significant role in the careers of many now-famous artists, musicians, photographers, and writers. Here in 1941 Gwendolyn Brooks and other young black writers took a poetry class from legendary teacher Inez Cunningham Stark; here Gordon Parks had his first darkroom in the center's basement; and here Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett shared their SAIC training with other artists who could not afford art school.<sup>6</sup> At the center, Cortor's work looked almost familiar, in the way a work of art might seem more approachable in a home, where there is neither an admission fee nor a description of the work on a museum label.

Originally an old brownstone redesigned by architects of the New Bauhaus, the SSCAC feels worlds apart from the new Whitney Museum or even from the Art Institute just a few miles north. No longer is this Bronzeville street bustling and middle-class; one lot next door and another across the street are vacant. Inside the center, floorboards creak in the central wood-paneled gallery. When I was there to see Cortor's work, visitors introduced themselves to one another, and we exchanged thoughts about the range of Cortor's paintings and prints on display. On one of the walls hung a series of etchings, including *Trilogy No. II, Verso* (undated), which depicts two crimson torsos,

horizontal and vertical (see p. 137). These torsos seem held in suspension against other mottled shapes, evoking pieces of rock set to be sculpted. After looking for a long time at this piece, what I see now is the negative space, the organic geometry between bodies, edged by arms and legs. Perhaps all compelling works of art engage the eye differently over time, and expand one's capacity to see. For me, this is certainly true of Cortor's work.

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When I interviewed Cortor, I had been seeing his work for just a few years. In the course of doing research for a book about Chicago modernism, I discovered that Cortor was still living, and I was anxious to learn what he might remember from the time when he lived in Chicago, a period of creative ferment during the 1930s and 1940s now known as the Chicago Black Renaissance.<sup>7</sup>

One dazzling painting on permanent display at the AIC, in particular, seems to express an intimate understanding of Chicago during this period, which was defined by the demographic shifts of the Great Migration. Millions of blacks fled the South in the decades following the First World War, pushed by white supremacy and pulled by opportunities in the Northern industrial economy—especially in the stockyards, railroads, and steel mills. They transformed Chicago's black community from a dispersed population of about 44,000 in 1910 to a densely packed neighborhood of 377,000 residents by 1944.<sup>8</sup> Inhabitants of the South Side neighborhood of Bronzeville were hemmed in by the city's racist, restrictive housing covenants, but they were also emboldened by their community's quest for economic and cultural self-determination.

Completed in 1948, *The Room No. VI* depicts long, thin bodies that stretch for space, sharing a pink-buttoned mattress and brightly patterned sheets (see p. 124).<sup>9</sup> The frame of the painting cuts off the legs and arms of the figures. Strewn on the floor are pages of a newspaper, an old milk bottle, and a pulp magazine—a blond pin-up on the cover. Contrasting with the overall gleaming precision of the painting, thick impasto gives three-dimensional texture to a few areas: a milk bottle, the stovepipe, and the curly hair of the women. Perhaps to underscore a relationship between white and black, a pink doll at the baseboard

raises its arm, signaling the cause of black deprivation. Indeed, the sheer presence of this doll—ugly but plump—against the painting’s central dark figures is suggestive of a radical disparity. The arm-raising gesture is indexical: it calls attention to itself. But the painting treats debased conditions—four people in one bed—with the intensity of a grand-scale history painting. Here is both impoverishment and epic grandeur.<sup>10</sup>

When I asked Cortor about this painting, he suggested, to my astonishment, that it seems visually connected to the cramped rooms described by Richard Wright in his best-selling 1940 novel *Native Son*. Cortor couldn’t remember the name of the novel’s protagonist Bigger Thomas, but he briskly recounted the novel’s many set-pieces: the group of young men at the pool hall hatching a robbery; Bigger’s gruesome murder of a white woman; the flight of Bigger “on the run.” And Cortor recalled how many people—“my people,” in his words—did not like the novel: Wright “hit on certain things, you see,” Cortor told me, “that people didn’t want to hear.” Middle-class blacks wished that Wright had affirmed black characters who were able to overcome their oppressive conditions. Racial uplift, Cortor suggested, was assumed to be the black artist’s responsibility.

Maybe racial uplift explains why Cortor committed himself to depicting beauty in the black body, even after his move to New York City during the thralls of abstract expressionism. A distinctive feature of Cortor’s work is the elongated female body, which resonates with forms of abstraction in African and Cubist art, in which Cortor was well versed through his training at the SAIC. Cortor was also attracted to the New Bauhaus in Chicago and the abstracted light creations of László Moholy-Nagy. As he put it, “They didn’t want you to have an art education” at the Institute of Design—it was all about the present—it was where “you became modern.” Indeed, Cortor experimented with abstraction while an art student, but he was worried about abstraction’s social implications. Influenced by his participation in the Works Progress Administration Federal Arts Project and his contact with the sociologist Horace Cayton, Jr., Cortor made a conscious decision to work in a more figurative mode. “I felt on the face of it, as a black, to be doing abstract—I just felt I couldn’t afford it, that it wouldn’t serve my purpose, to get over my message.”<sup>11</sup> To deliver a “message” as a visual artist was to work with forms that gesture, even if just slightly, to some form of figuration, a recognizable content.



Eldzier Cortor, *The Room No. VI*, 1948, oil and gesso on Masonite, 42 1/4 × 31 1/2 inches, 2007.329, The Art Institute of Chicago. Image © Estate of Eldzier Cortor. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.



Eldzier Cortor, *The Couple*, 1948, oil on Masonite, 28 × 22 inches, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. Image © Estate of Eldzier Cortor. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Cortor's choice may have been familiar to many of his Bronzeville peers. To my count, there are no abstract artists associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> The range of writers and artists who were part of this movement is vast, but certain figures stand out. Painter Archibald Motley, Jr., became well known for his sumptuous portraits and jazz scenes. Charles White achieved recognition for his masterful works of social realism—especially his WPA murals—that often depict the physical labor of African Americans. (Like Cortor, both Motley and White trained at the SAIC.) As for Cortor's literary cohort—which includes Frank Marshall Davis, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks—by the late 1930s, all of these writers were well-informed of the experimental aesthetic forms of transatlantic modernism, but they were a diverse, loose flock of followers. Despite an awareness of the “new,” writers of Bronzeville often chose familiar literary forms that were demonstrably more radical in sentiment and subject than in form. Perhaps with the exception of Brooks, originality lay in exposing their stories with unflinching fidelity to harsh social realities, especially conditions of black life in Chicago.

Which is to say, if there is a defining aesthetic of the Chicago Black Renaissance, then it might be identified as a tension that characterizes Chicago modernism more broadly: between a documentary impulse to narrate, *to tell a story*, and a modernist birthright that revels in stylistic experiment. The literary forms of the Chicago Black Renaissance might be traced back, in part, through the works of earlier Chicago writers—Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson—who observed the effects of rapid modernization, industrial capitalism, and increased mechanization upon everyday life.<sup>13</sup> On the whole, abstraction and other forms of modernist play are often held in check by the pull of narrative realism (for writers) and figuration (for artists).

No artist better embodies this tension than Cortor. Mostly, it is a productive tension, though not all viewers are compelled by elements of Cortor's style that seem to date his particular fascinations: the surreal symbolism of his objects, or the art deco ornamentation around his dancing figures. When I interviewed Cortor, we sat in an upstairs room at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in Chelsea. Propped against the wall was Cortor's 1948 painting *The Couple*, which depicts the vividly colored heads of a woman and man against an iridescent rainbow of color, like disco lights (see p. 125). Several objects in the painting seem

heavily symbolic, as if a dream story awaiting interpretation: a sheet of newspaper creased over a light bulb; a green die hanging from the bulb's gold chain; diagonal folds of mosquito netting. At the end of our interview, Cortor and I looked at the work together, along with his son Michael and one of the gallery's senior associates. Apparently, the objects in the painting portend disaster. When I observed that the man in the painting was sleeping while the woman was wide awake, Cortor replied: "This woman is saying, 'I got to get the hell out of here!'"

For decades, Michael Rosenfeld has been showing the work of African American artists in exhibitions that illuminate the heterogeneity of twentieth-century aesthetic forms. When I interviewed Cortor, the gallery was exhibiting works by Alma Thomas: blasts of geometric color, vivid animate patterns. I learned later that Michelle Obama recently unveiled a work by Thomas in the White House dining room, *Resurrection* (1966), a stunning square canvas with a circular orb of comma-like colors. To reject a representation of the black body, of course, is its own politics, a choice to step beyond or away from the burden of representing race.

Absence, too, can also be acknowledgement. In one of the most provocative and beautifully written books of 2015, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that America was built upon the pillage and erasure of black bodies, from slavery up through the current prison-industrial complex. "Here is what I would like for you to know," Coates writes to his teenage son, to whom the book is addressed: "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage." Cortor's work speaks to this history; or rather, over many years, his work helps us to see it.

## NOTES

1/ Randy Kennedy, “Black Artists and the March into the Museum,” *New York Times*, 29 November 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/design/black-artists-and-the-march-into-the-museum.html>.

2/ From December 2013 to March 2014, the San Antonio Museum of Art presented “Eldzier Cortor: Master Printmaker,” which, like the 2015 AIC exhibition, focused mostly on Cortor’s prints.

3/ For a discussion of the selection process for the handbook, see Dana Miller, “Defining ‘American,’” in *Whitney Museum of American Art: Handbook of the Collection*, ed. Dana Miller (New York: Whitney Museum, distributed by Yale University Press, 2015), 32–33.

4/ At the dedication of the new Whitney Museum in 2015, first lady Michelle Obama remarked: “You see, there are so many kids in this country who look at places like museums and concert halls and other cultural centers and they think to themselves, well, that’s not a place for me, for someone who looks like me, for someone who comes from my neighborhood. In fact, I guarantee you that right now, there are kids living less than a mile from here who would never in a million years dream that they would be welcome in this museum.” See the full transcript at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

5/ On Cortor’s training, see Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 272–279.

6/ On Inez Cunningham Stark, see my “Across Stark Lines” in *Centennial: A History of the Renaissance Society 1915–2015*, ed. Karen Reimer (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2016), 50–58. See also “Our Legacy” on the SSCAC’s website, [www.sscartcenter.org](http://www.sscartcenter.org).

7/ Robert Bone coined the term “Chicago Black Renaissance” in “Richard Wright and the Chicago Black Renaissance,” *Callaloo* 28 (Summer 1986), 446–468. The scholarship on the Chicago Black Renaissance is rapidly growing. Over the past decade and a half, key book-length studies have been written or edited by Davarian Baldwin, Robert Bone and Richard Courage, Brian Dolinar, Adam Green, Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey, Jr., Mary Hricko, Lawrence Jackson, Anne Meis Knupfer, Stacy Morgan, Bill Mullen, Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach, Jacqueline Stewart, and Steven Tracy.

8/ These are the figures given by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton in their landmark study, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945), 8.

9/ Cortor’s *The Room No. VI* was included in the AIC’s 2013 exhibition

*They Seek a City: Chicago and the Art of Migration 1910–1950*, and now hangs permanently in the museum’s American Wing.

10/ I am indebted to Sarah Kelly Oehler’s interpretation of this painting in *They Seek a City: Chicago and the Art of Migration, 1910–1950* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2013), 81–84.

11/ Bearden and Henderson, *African-American Artists*, 274.

12/ I am thinking here of visual artists and writers. If we consider music, jazz is arguably Bronzeville’s most exported art form, an improvisational vernacular that many scholars would consider a form of modernist abstraction.

13/ I make this argument more completely in *Chicago Renaissance: The Midwest and Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

### Acknowledgments

For permission to print reproductions of paintings and historical photographs in this feature, the editors thank the Estate of Eldzier Cortor and the South Side Community Art Center. Images were graciously provided by the Art Institute of Chicago and the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. Special thanks to Arcilla Stahl at the South Side Community Art Center and to Marjorie Van Cura at the Rosenfeld Gallery. Our deep appreciation to Michael Cortor for facilitating the interview with his father.