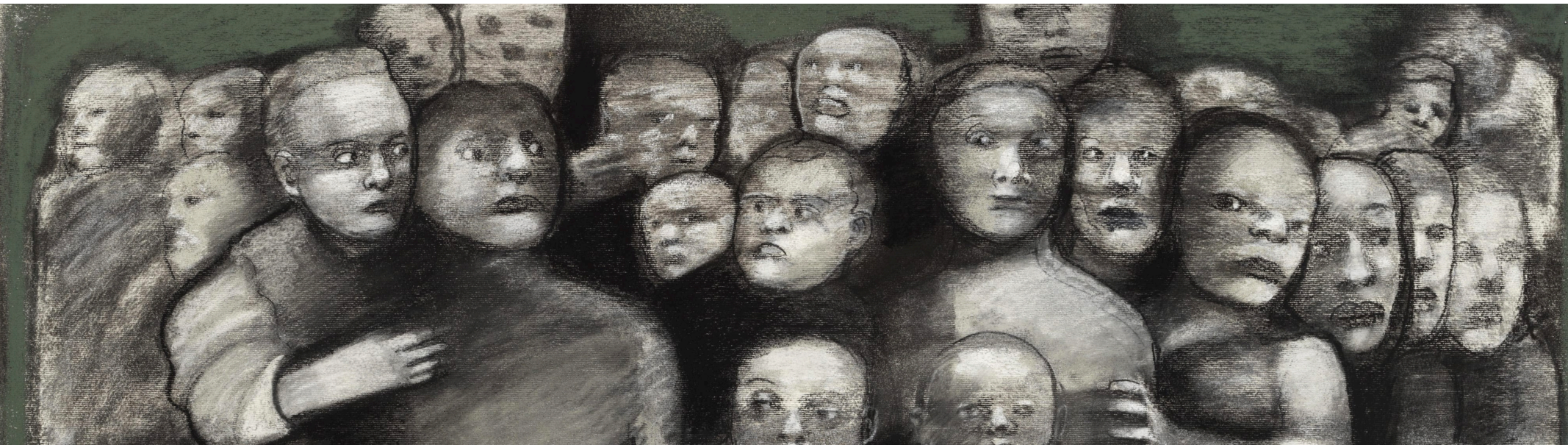


CORBETT
— VS. —
DEMPSEY

THE BIG DIG: EMILIO CRUZ • I AM FOOD I EAT THE EATER OF
FOOD



THE ULTIMATE DRAWINGS OF EMILIO CRUZ

In 2004, a few months before his death, Emilio Cruz completed a set of drawings with the collective title *I Am Food I Eat The Eater Of Food*. Together with another large group of works entitled *Life On Earth*, which was finished in 2002, the 43 panels of *I Am Food* represent a definitive parting statement – a major summary of Cruz's life project.

Cruz was a committed humanist with a wide-ranging philosophical orientation. Born in Harlem and raised in the Bronx, of Cuban heritage, he emerged in the early 1960s associated with a group of figurative painters that included Jan Müller, Bob Thompson, Red Grooms, and Lester Johnson. Early in his career, after group exhibitions in Provincetown and Chicago (at a newly founded Richard Gray Gallery), he showed his bright, highly expressionistic works – canvases and pastels – in New York at the downtown artist-run gallery called the Delancey Street Museum and midtown with Zabriskie Gallery, starting with a solo exhibition in 1963, and Martha Jackson Gallery. In 1969, Cruz was invited to be the head of visual art with the St. Louis collective Black Artists Group (BAG). A drummer himself, as well as a playwright and poet, he maintained a continued affiliation with BAG's musician members as well as their colleagues in Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). With his wife Patricia, an accomplished actress, Cruz moved to Chicago for the duration of the 1970s, teaching at the School of the Art Institute, showing at Walter Kelly Gallery, and along the way contributing images to several record covers by the Art Ensemble of Chicago. He returned to New York in 1982, where he was represented by Anita Shapolsky Gallery and exhibited extensively with solo museum shows at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Alternative Museum. Solo exhibitions were also mounted at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the California African American Museum in Los Angeles.

Cruz's unapologetically critical attitude and fierce sense of independence carried little favor with authority; nevertheless his reputation grew steadily during the last quarter century of his life. In 1984, Henry Geldzahler of the Metropolitan Museum of Art wrote: "Emilio Cruz's work deserves to be widely known and handsomely supported." The work Cruz was making at the time was rich in metaphor and symbolism, steeped in the artist's deep investment in literature and philosophy (including the Vedic text *Taittiriya Upanishad*, from which he took the title *I Am Food I Eat The Eater Of Food*) – quite out of step with currents in the New York art world of the era. Where he'd utilized hieroglyphic-like line drawings in some of the more abstract and totemic work he made in Chicago, Cruz now concentrated on more volumetrically shaded figures, human and animal, sharply rendered and situated in dreamscape settings. He developed a unique kind of hyperreal allegorical art that could be evocative, violent, and elemental. And his subject matter was prescient – the dire consequences of our treatment of the planet and one another; the interplay of the monstrous, the quotidian, and the mythic; the basic pleasures and pains of being a social creature. Cruz made a large body of works in a series called *Homo Sapiens*, most of which were executed on tall, thin wood panels in oil and encaustic, sometimes with sand and other materials mixed in. The two ultimate bodies of drawings in his oeuvre were made in charcoal on paper. Cruz painted oil versions of some of the works, but both *Life On Earth* and each of the two parts of *I Am Food I Eat The Eater Of Food*, which comprise complete sets of drawings, were meant to be kept together as units, somewhat like Jacob Lawrence's "Migration" series – panels in a visionary intellectual storyboard.

Part One of *I Am Food I Eat The Eater Of Food*, a group of 20 drawings, was shown at Alitash Kebede Gallery in Los Angeles just two months before Cruz passed away in 2004, age 66, of pancreatic cancer. The remaining 23 works that make up Part Two of the series have never been shown. This Big Dig presents these previously unseen drawings, together with Cruz's written meditation on the series, Amiri Baraka's eulogy for Cruz, and an interview with Patricia Cruz.

- John Corbett, December 2020



Emilio Cruz with the "Life On Earth" drawings, 2002. (Photo: Anthony Barboza)

JOHN CORBETT AND PATRICIA CRUZ IN CONVERSATION

JOHN CORBETT: Tell me about you and Emilio, the working relationship that you had along the years, maybe starting with the period that you were in St. Louis together, the roles you had in the Black Artists Group (BAG) in 1969?

PATRICIA CRUZ: Can I begin a little bit before that, if you don't mind?

JC: Please.

PC: Emilio and I met in Tompkins Square Park. I was sitting on a bench with a friend who was known to Emilio – probably not to me – as being a drug addict; I was oblivious to just about everything because I was about 19. He came along and said, “Is that your baby?” And I said no, I was babysitting. Emilio said, “Oh, then I can say hello to you.” Because otherwise he was gonna be gone. Anyway, he was quite a hero in Tompkins Square Park, not as a painter but as a softball player. He was known as Spiderman. Everybody would go, oh, Spiderman, Spiderman, wherever we went. We went to a movie once on 42nd Street, and there were people there calling out his name, so I thought he was really famous. (laughs) In Tompkins Square he said he was a painter but everybody said they were an artist, so I was very skeptical. You know, these people on the Lower East Side would walk around with brushes in their back pockets – that made them artists.

JC: What year did you meet him?

PC: I think it was '67. I don't think I had turned 20. We had a whirlwind affair. We ate at a wonderful Italian restaurant called Alonzo's on the Lower East Side where gangsters ate, and there was a whole table of antipasta. The gangsters were all in the back room, so the restaurant was largely empty. So we went on this one date and then Emilio got a notice by telegram – that's how long ago this was – of an opening that he was invited to, the opening of the National Museum of American Art. That was our first real date. I think he had no money. I worked in a co-operative meat market in the Lower East Side called N.A.G. – Negro Action Group. I had enough money to pay for two Amtrak tickets down to D.C. for the opening of this fancy thing. I had to go out and buy a dress and lipstick. It was really serious bohemia. I lived on 11th Street in an apartment for about \$69 a month, with the tub in the kitchen. So we go down to D.C. for the opening of the National Museum, but we have to find Sam Gilliam, because we needed to ask him if we could sleep at his place. The piece in the show was among Emilio's smaller works, and we were like, okay, but first we gotta find Sam. We went to dinner at a landscape architect's home. Jacob Lawrence was among the artists who were there. And they served the most delicious clam chowder, and we were like, oh, wow, this is the first course – well, no, that was it. So we had to get up and run over to the National Museum, and then after we didn't find Sam, they shuttled us into the garden, and they locked us in. Because L.B.J. was going to give a speech on the occasion of the opening of the museum.

JC: Holy shit.

PC: L.B.J. enters and everybody but me stands up, because he's the President. He's the President, but he's fighting an unjust war, and I'm not standing. So everybody was going up and down around me, thinking oh, maybe we shouldn't stand. So the FBI was focused on us because here we were like, oh, don't

stand, stand, don't stand. And I was just like, what? I'm not doing that. After that, we finally found Sam, and we went up and slept on his upper floor. It wasn't even a mattress, just the springs! (laughs) And we made a lot of noise, because we weren't sleeping.

JC: Nice.

PC: This was a date, you know? So there we were, on the springs. And we came back and we've been together ever since. Isn't that great?

JC: Wonderful.

PC: So then he would go down to his studio on 3rd Street, and I was on 11th Street, and he had a visit from the folks in the Black Artists Group, but it was really Julius Hemphill.

JC: The great alto saxophonist and composer.

PC: Julius came and then other people told us you need to take this Rockefeller/Danforth Grant, I think it was recommended, actually, by Dick Bellamy, because Emilio's career had kind of gone up, but was on its way down, and Martha Jackson, and, before that Virginia Zabriskie, were not really selling any more. I mean they had been selling a lot - Emilio's work was very popular - and then it wasn't so much, and we didn't have any money, and they were trying to get us to come because we could do this residency. Emilio thought, I don't need to go to St. Louis, are you kidding, that sounds dreadful, and I was like, please don't go to St. Louis, it is dreadful. Because I had gone to school in that area, and I thought it was next to Hell. But then Julius came down and he and Emilio just fell in love. Julius was as much like Bob Thompson, I think, as anybody Emilio had met since. Brilliant, charismatic, and attractive, and he made some incredibly beautiful music.

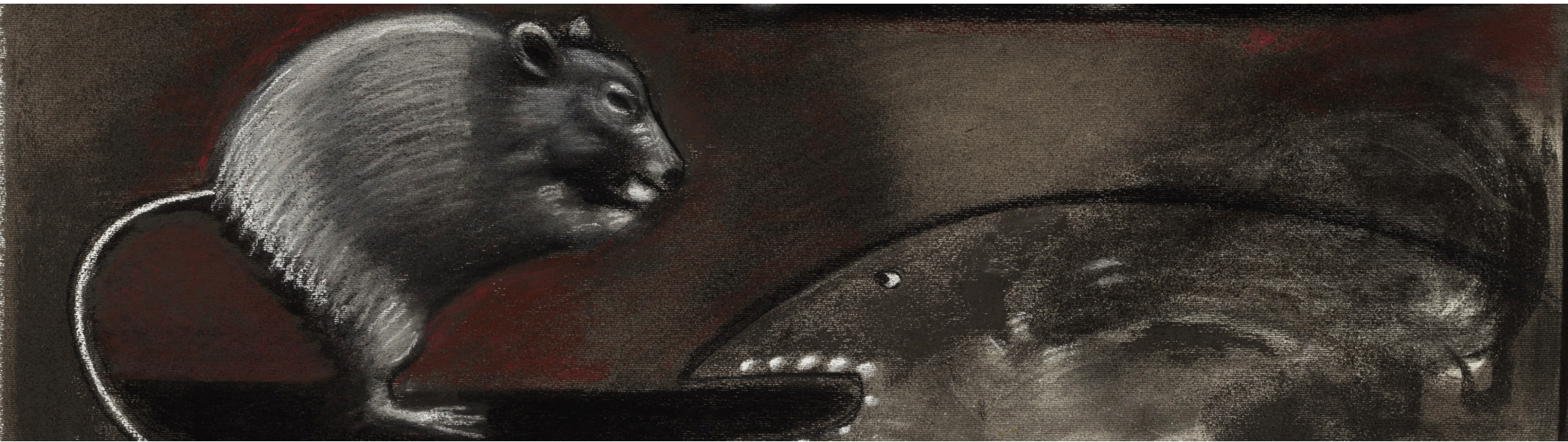
JC: Emilio and Julius didn't know each other before this?

PC: No, not at all.

JC: And how did they get introduced?

PC: Julius was in New York to scout people because they were offering a Rockefeller/Danforth Grant, and the stipend was something like \$10,000, which seemed like a lot of money at that time. So we went there, and the Rockefeller/Danforth people and the Black Artist Group wanted us to set up Emilio's studio, and the studio for the program, in Pruitt-Igoe. Now, I don't know if you know Pruitt-Igoe, but it made the Robert Taylor Homes look like the Taj Mahal, okay?

JC: Rough, tough.



PC: It was desperate, horrible, a mess. With huge icicles going down the entire twenty floors out of broken windows. Bodies and heads were found in the dumpsters. It was completely insane. So they said, we want you to have your studio there, and Emilio's like, you gotta be crazy. So we found the BAG building, an abandoned space, and Emilio was to teach classes there; what happened was that a guy did the outside work and the roof and the walls, and we had to do everything else to put it together. Emilio and I went in - we had this red stuff that you put on the floor to clean it up, because it had become a pigeon graveyard.

JC: Yikes.

PC: So there was nothing but dead pigeons and pigeon crap, which we later learned was incredibly poisonous, so we went through, sweeping up all this muck to clean it up, without masks, give us a broom and give us the red stuff, and we'll sweep it up and get it gone. And we did. Emilio had these pristine white walls, and some of the BAG people came in and painted them red, green, and black, the Black Nationalist colors. Emilio was mortified. But that was downstairs and our studio was on the second floor, so we had a 5,000 square foot space up there. We didn't know anything about St. Louis heat, so people would come up and they'd say - you need air conditioning! Or at least you need a fan! We didn't even have the sense enough to have a fan. So what we did, though, was go over to LaClede Town every single day to go swimming in their pool. LaClede Town was a development that many artists lived in, [alto saxophonist] Oliver Lake lived there, and [poet] Shirley LeFlore lived there with her husband. We went over and swam every day because that was the only way to cool off. We were on the top floor on a flat roof building. It was only two stories. But that was just like, sunbaked. So, that was our beginning.

JC: What kind of work was Emilio making at the time?

PC: That's an interesting question. I think he was doing largely geometric works, and there was some figuration in some of it, but mostly he was doing his

geometric work, using masking tape, acrylic. He had a number of shows in St. Louis. He was teaching, too. Because the program was about community. That's why they wanted us to be in the Pruitt-Igoe, so we could really teach *the people*.

JC: Right.

PC: Our "community" Ahh! So we worked with a number of their collaborative programs. Emilio brought some of the ideas that he had gleaned from working at Judson Church in terms of happenings. Oh god, what's his name, the big happening guy.

JC: Allan Kaprow.

PC: Allan Kaprow, yeah. Emilio participated in some of those events. And he was involved in Judson Church. So he brought some of those kind of multidisciplinary ideas down to St. Louis, but also Julius was doing some of that work. I was kind of... what? The teenage gopher girl that didn't realize I was a teenage girl...in residence. I was just helping out wherever I could.

JC: You had an activist bent at that point.

PC: Yes, I did. That's why I didn't stand up for Lyndon Johnson. We joined alliances with Percy Green. Percy Green had a group called ACTION [Action Council To Improve Opportunities for Negroes]. Percy is still very much alive. He was the most effective activist I've ever met, and I've met a whole bunch of them. He worked a full time job I believe at Monsanto. He would take his lunch break and climb onto the St. Louis Arch as it was being built, to stop the building, by himself, in an effort to get them to hire more Black construction people.

JC: Crazy.

PC: And it worked. Because he was not moving. He was just there. He did all these actions which were more like Happening actions. There used to be this thing called the Veiled Prophet Ball, which was really another version of the Ku Klux Klan, and they rode through the streets, *hooded*, on horses. So Percy laid down tacks on their path and wrecked the whole parade. He then went to a factory – I don't know if it was at Monsanto or one of the other big companies down there – and actually chained the doors shut when the people were inside; they couldn't get out and when they did come out he had put molasses all over the street. (laughs)

JC: That's chutzpah.

PC: They elected me as the spokesperson because I've got a big mouth and I'd say any damn thing, and I thought I was right – when you're so young, you *know* that you're right. I organized a strike with Percy, and we went out on a flatbed truck that the guys rented, and they had a sound speaker system and a generator, and they're all gonna go out and play avant-garde music in Pruitt-Igoe. And I'm the spokesperson. We rented chairs and everybody was out there. So I started talking about why they shouldn't pay rent because they lived in such horrid conditions. I was like – you've got rats and you've got dead bodies in

dumpsters and you shouldn't pay rent, blah blah blah. And they were furious. Because they were like, you're talking about our homes. Who the hell are you and why are you doing this? So they start picking up the chairs that we had rented and throwing them at us. That was not a very happy outcome, and we had to escape. We left the generator and whatever else people had to gather up, and we just sped away. That was a lesson for me.

JC: Emilio was not as engaged in the political side of things.



PC: No. He said all art is political, I'm not gonna give speeches. He wrote a lot about this stuff, but he wasn't that kind of activist. He was an artist. We did those things together, he kind of went along, and I think the other guys were like, can you control your wife? Because this is not good.

JC: Aside from the activism, did you participate in the artistic activities?

PC: I thought I was an actress. I wanted to act. And I did, for many years after that. When we left St. Louis, I ended up going to Goodman School of Theatre for training. But what happened was, we were there and then the funding ran out, and then, you know, some great music was made, but really what everyone needed to do was to get out of there and go to New York, so people would know who they were. And we just felt that they would be buried there...

JC: ...in St. Louis.

PC: ...in anonymity...

JC: Yeah.

PC: ...in St. Louis. Most of the guys left and came to New York. Oliver Lake and the others. Some had already come here, like [trumpeter] Lester Bowie was coming back and forth already and was based between Chicago and New York.

JC: And [trombonist] Joseph Bowie too.

PC: Yeah, exactly. Joseph Bowie was one of the babies.

JC: A young'un. (both laugh)

PC: Along with [drummer Charles] Bobo Shaw. He was one of the babies too. Adventurous, wonderful, and rebellious, of course. At any rate, we were like, you gotta get out of here, and most of them left, and a part of it was that the grant that sustained the building and all the programs had run out. So people started to disperse, and Emilio got an offer to go up to Chicago to teach at the Art Institute. That was a big change. At the same time he had gotten an NEA fellowship, one of the first. Now, I wanted desperately to come back to New York, because I'd grown up in Chicago, I did *not* want to go back to Chicago. And the carrot for me was that if Emilio took the position I would be able to get free training at the Goodman School of Theatre. I did that for two years, got a [shrugs] "degree," it was more like a certificate than a real degree. I was really a student of Emilio's. I mean, he was my mentor, he was my teacher. In fact, I just pulled down a copy of *The Wasteland* that I had gotten him. I thought he was gonna be so thrilled with it because he introduced me to Eliot and we would read in bed and he would talk about it. And I bought him this annotated version of *The Wasteland*, much later, and he was just like Emilio was with everything, he was like, oh, yeah, thanks. It was like, uhh, can we get a little bit more response than that?

JC: How do you see that aspect of his personality, where did that come from? Was it arrogance or indifference or what?

PC: I don't quite know. Emilio was very passionate about so many things. I have no idea.

JC: How would you describe him? He's obviously a very critical person who thought hard and deeply and carefully about the things that he was doing and had expectations of the people around him, and it seems like he pulled no punches.

PC: Right, right.

JC: We're on the cusp of your return to New York in this narrative, and by that point, you knew him very well. How did you see him in the context of the idea of returning to New York? How did you feel about it and how did he feel about it?

PC: Emilio was both brilliant and very, very angry. And a part of the anger came from what he felt was a lack of recognition for his work, but also because he came out of the Bronx and had to fight for everything that he got. He anticipated an insult before it was even given. (laughs) Somebody would *look* at a work, or look at him, in a way that he felt was insulting. And sometimes it would be. But he almost went for Golden Gloves in boxing, and he loved that kind of physicality. He was a softball player, he was really, very athletic in ways that not a lot of artists were.

JC: How did he fit in with the downtown Black artist scene? I'm thinking of artists like Frank Bowling.

PC: Frank was downtown, but you know, he was Guyanese and British, in the West Indian strain. Everybody had their little groups. But we knew Frank well.

JC: How about Joe Overstreet?

PC: Oh, Joe was from California, but also he was from Indian territory, and his people were part Indian. A lot of Black people have that. And he looked that part. But he and Emilio hated each other, I mean, they just *hated* each other. Finally, there was this show in Chile, and they ended up being roommates...

JC: Oh, man.

PC: ...and they ended up realizing that they had a lot in common and really liked each other a lot, you know?

JC: That can happen, that reversal.

PC: It was a very late realization.

JC: Was there a big divide between the African-American figurative artists of the time and those Black artists who were invested primarily in abstraction? I mean, you guys were bunking at Sam Gilliam's, and Sam is...

PC: ...really abstract, yeah.

JC: Or other people like Ed Clark...

PC: I think that the divide was as much generational as it was about the artmaking. I think that, you know, Emilio didn't have a great deal of respect, and I'm saying that with some diplomacy, for the generations that came before him, and felt that...

JC: For older folks?

PC: Yeah. Whether it was [Romare] Bearden or [Jacob] Lawrence, he felt that their work existed in a kind of sentimental frame.

JC: I think that's really interesting.

PC: What happened was that was a part of his mostly youthful resistance to the next generation, not unlike how [Amiri] Baraka (when he was [LeRoi] Jones) talked about Baldwin, or how Baldwin talked about Wright. Because all of them existed in this world of: now it's our turn.

JC: Makes sense.

PC: And it's not your turn anymore. Unfortunately, with most Black artists, there wasn't room for a lot at the top. You know, you are the genius of Black artists. And that's where you are until you're knocked off the pedestal. And then the young turks would come and knock you off the pedestal.

JC: Sure.

PC: I remember, we had done an exhibition when I was at the Studio Museum and Bearden was there, and somehow he knew I was Emilio's wife, so he said, "Well, how's the genius doing?" (both laugh) in this way that was kind of if not fully sarcastic. And so when I told Emilio, he was like, really, he said that? But I don't think he got the sarcasm from it.

JC: The double meaning. One of the features of Emilio's work, in the way I look at it and certainly the way that he talks about it a lot in his writing, is addressing humanity in a fairly general way.

PC: Right.



JC: Not necessarily casting himself as a "Black artist" in the sense of speaking exclusively to Black issues, for Black people. But then, on the other hand, most of the figures in his work are Black. Not all of them. But there are lots of Black figures in his work. He seemed like he took a perspective that neither tried to whitewash race nor sought to fixate on it as the primary object.

PC: He actually resisted that idea, that he should be the painter of Black subject matter. And his *Homo Sapiens* series is named *Homo Sapiens* for a reason. It embraces all of humanity, all of this particular species. That was his subject matter. He mightily resisted the idea of even being considered a Black artist. As many people later did, but he resisted that all the time, you know? He felt that that was a diminution of who he was, and what his subject should be, and didn't want to be categorized in a way that was less than what he thought his humanity deserved.

JC: That attitude allowed him a kind of universalizing position, one where he could speak broadly and generally, but on specific topics about humankind, and it seems to me not only humankind, but also the relationship with animals.

PC: Absolutely. And he really did see us as Giordano Bruno did, as all of the philosophers and thinkers did, as *planetary-specific beings*. That was something he really believed in, that we are of this planet and that is how we have evolved to be here – that's how our lungs work, that's how our spines work.

JC: What was it like to come back to New York after having been away for a little more than a decade?

PC: In Chicago, he was at the Art Institute and I was at Goodman, we were doing a lot of theater projects together, I was performing in his theater works. We came back from Paris after taking his pieces *Homeostasis* and *The Absence* there, two major works featuring [saxophonist] Henry Threadgill and [multi-instrumentalist] Douglas Ewart and others, which we performed in Italy and France. We came back to Chicago, and you can appreciate this, John, when the snow was like three feet deep and full of pee and shit and all everything that happened in these snows that just accumulates and stays on the ground forever.

JC: Welcome home.

PC: And we came back, oh my god, we can't take it. And I started sending out my resume to get us back to New York.

JC: Chicago is not always welcoming in the winter.

PC: And Chicago never was, to Emilio especially. Because he was seen as a kind of New York know-it-all, that kind of second-city syndrome where you are the enemy unless you're from Pulaski Road.

JC: Very insular and suspicious, it can be that way, yes.

PC: We ended up being a refuge for people coming either from the West Coast or from the East Coast, all of the traveling musicians would end up staying with us. We had Ornette Coleman come in, we had Julius, they all stayed in our place on North Avenue. It was great fun, and that was our relief, to be able to have those people there. We did readings there, you know, they all played music there, and we cooked for people, so it was great, and they stayed with us. That was wonderful. One time we had Ornette in to visit, and Ornette was such a country bumpkin in so many ways, Ornette ends up hailing a police car thinking it's a cab. Just hailing any car on the street that had things on top, because he wasn't in New York anymore. We were out searching for the best

barbecue in Chicago but none of it compared to Texas barbecue, so we just had to make do. But at any rate, we finally decided to come back to New York, and I came first. Emilio still had a semester to finish up at the Art Institute. I was here for about four months before he came, and looking for places for us to live. And we were going from pillar to post, and that was horrible. But more horrible than that was, in New York we became these usurpers. It was like, who the fuck are you, really? They didn't believe that he was one of the pioneers of figurative expressionism. So you had all these people who were doing this work that was very much after Emilio and Bob [Thompson] and all the people who had been doing it here in New York in the '50s and '60s, but people didn't believe that he was who he was. So there was a real battle to reestablish his identity. And it was hard for him because he didn't have the kind of gallery representation that he had before, and there was this real sense of being a usurper, and, "that's what you say, you were a part of this movement but how do we know that," you know? It was painful coming back. And he had come from a teaching position which could sustain us to doing some associate teaching here and not having real gallery representation. Gino Rodriguez gave him a beautiful show, down at the Alternative Museum and then he had a show up at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

JC: Emilio completed two monumental sets of drawings – *Life On Earth* and *I Am Food I Eat the Eater of Food* – within three years of his passing. Some people get started on a long series like that and never complete it, so in some ways it's an amazing feat that both those, what I see as being crowning achievement sets of works, got completed. Presumably he didn't know he was sick until quite soon before he passed.

PC: Ten days.

JC: So he wasn't working toward a goal, in that sense of, "I have to get these finished."

PC: No. When Emilio went back to figuration, working with some of the paintings that you've seen, they were related in subject matter, a lot of that came out of the philosophy that we talked about earlier, of planetary-specific beings – whether you're a leaf with a spine or a snake with a spine or a human with a spine, you're all related. So the works came out of his philosophy. This is how his intellectual process was made manifest in the physical work and the making of work. So he was making paintings, but he's always been a prolific drawer. I would come home from work and we'd have mail, but on the mail, I couldn't figure out who it was from, because Emilio had drawn all over the envelopes. "Is this a bill? What is that?" And then it's like, "Don't touch that, I'm using those sketches." He was making artwork all the time, and I think one of the things, when you talk about the series, and making that series, I would leave for work at the Studio Museum, and Emilio would be in a robe and some form of house shoes, with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, working in the studio, going back and forth to the wall to get distance on what he was seeing, so a common sight was to see him walk up, make a mark on a drawing, walk back, take a puff on the cigarette, throw it on the ground, walk back up, and make another mark. I would leave at about 8:30 or 9 in the morning, and I'd come back at 6 or 7 in the evening, and he would be doing the same thing.

JC: Super focused. But that constant work was a newer thing, that was something that really came along when he was in New York?

PC: No, Emilio always worked 24/7. But in New York, when you're younger, there are more distractions. When he wasn't making paintings or drawings he was writing. And then later he was playing the drums. But those became things he did in between making an art object, whether it was drawing or painting or sculpting. He was constantly engaged in making manifestations of his thoughts.

JC: A compulsive creative worker.

PC: And always referential to the whole history of art. He thought of cave drawings as menus. He said, oh, these are really menus, and this is like, okay, you can get some buffalo right here – they're moving in this direction, go eat that thing. Whether it was sacred art or practical in that way, looking at African art, looking at the Renaissance, he was voracious in the variety of works that he saw and loved. His father taught him to draw. His father was quite an accomplished draftsman, born in Cuba, accepted into one of the fine art schools, but then, when they realized he was Black, they said, I'm sorry, we've made a mistake. So his father came here – this is back in Bautista's time, way before Castro. And he had this history of having a family that was very poor but very well educated and believed deeply in education. Emilio's mother would read *Leaves of Grass* to them. And the Bible.

JC: What an upbringing.

PC: And his father taught him to draw. Even if they didn't have food – and he talked about times when they were really, you know, starving, I mean, with the kids moving up and down on the couch, you know, going, "We are hungry, we are hungry," that kind of thing.

JC: What did his father do for a living?

PC: I don't know what he did in the early days. After five kids and no money, it was very hard, but what his father ended up doing, his father was quite brilliant and educated, but he ended up being a hairdresser. His father was quite attractive. And apparently he was quite temperamental. People would say, "Oh, I used to go to your father to get my hair done and then I said something that he didn't like and he threw me out of the shop with shampoo in my hair." His father was little, about my size. And apparently was pretty punishing with the kids, you know, and especially Emilio, who was named after him.



JC: So that helps us understand the seriousness and reactivity of Emilio.

PC: Right. And his father had all these books, some of which, you know, his family, his sisters inherited, but some of which he gave to people who had become his, kind of, acolytes. And it was quite interesting, after hearing Emilio talk about his father, and then hear these other people come in and say, "Your father taught me everything I know!" That was not the kind of reputation that I had understood from Emilio. Emilio reconciled with his father, but only at the very end of his father's life. His father was dying of prostate cancer and I remember Emilio coming here to New York to see him at the end, and that was the point of their reconciliation.

JC: Did you go with Emilio to California in 2004, when he showed Part One of *I Am Food I Eat the Eater of Food*?

PC: I did.

JC: Can you describe that experience?

PC: It was hard, because Emilio was sick and he didn't know why. He just had this terrible stomach thing, and he was unable to hold food down. He was in pain, but he apparently had a very high tolerance for pain. He was not well during that time. Emilio had a certain intolerance across the board for what he considered a bourgeois experience. You know, Simon Schama does this wonderful description of what the bourgeoisie is in *The Embarrassment of Riches*? He gives this incisive characterization of, essentially, the nouveau riche, and what their values were. Their values were materialistic; they were not intellectual. They were not deep thinkers, they were deep consumers, you know? Schama was particularly talking about the Dutch Renaissance. I think Emilio was disappointed in the lack of depth of the people who were looking at the art.

JC: I have a feeling that's something that many artists experience, that letdown.

PC: Jill Lepore talks about how we became a nation of consumers as opposed to citizens. It's that kind of consumer mentality that permeates everything. And it doesn't require a depth of learning. It just means that you're able to consume. I don't think Emilio was ever really attracted to California. So he was unhappy there. He was unhappy because he was also very sick.

JC: Did he go to the opening?

PC: Oh yeah, he was there. But, you know, it is what it is, and I think many artists have problems at openings because they're so social and it's a marketplace that doesn't have anything to do, mostly, with the appreciation of an idea.

JC: Yeah, sure.

PC: It's hard if those are your standards. If you are expecting that intellectual engagement, then you're gonna be disappointed. These drawings seem

to me to have an apocalyptic kind of presence, and I have never thought of the apocalypse in the more frequently used sense, as “the end.” This is my interpretation, not Emilio’s, but I think of the apocalyptic quality of these drawings as being a lifting of the veil, seeing what is behind the idea of civilization, what’s underneath. It’s a battle between demons and angels, although I’ve subsequently come to see, and I think Emilio was referring to this with his reference to the Upanishad, that these are two sides of the same coin.



All of Us Are Hungry



A Matter Of Choice



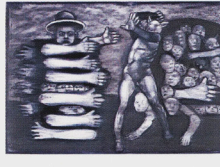
Assassination Of The Hamster



Basket Of Fruit Visiting The Wind



Equestrians



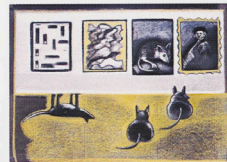
Flexor Digitorum Proundus



I am Food



Liaison For Antonin Artaud



Mice Scrutinizing Art & Culture



Necropolis Of Spies



Necropolis Viewed Through My Window



Pick It Up Boys



Predictable Arena Of Sorrow



Sabotage & Guesswork



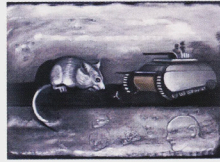
Still Life With Fox



Svangali Hypnotzing Mice



The Vultures Guest



Think Tank



Tiger Man Developing Language



We Don't Have To

“A pig does not want to die for fear of not being a pig;
The horse fears most to lose its equine nature.”

Giordano Bruno, 1548 - 1600

EMILIO CRUZ

1938 - 2004

“I am Food I Eat The Easter Of Food”
- Upanishad

CRIPPLED PARADISE FOR CANNIBALS

Art that fails to articulate a liturgical mission is purely decorative, deceptive entertainment. Now that the teeth have been pulled from the once competing macro-predators that once loomed large in our psyche's dynamically affected art and served as totems, because they threatened Life on Earth, are stuffed cadavers of extinct species stored under controlled temperature in the basements of Natural History Museums, it has become glaringly clear that one cannot seek to deprive another of their humanity and grace without depriving themselves of their own. "Anyone who succumbs to the moment and adopts its style will be killed by the moment that follows."
Roberto Calasso.

The aesthetic principles employed in these paintings utilizing paradoxical formal and image structures I first applied in the 1960s. Humbly attributable to the recognition of the omnipresent principles of paradox that dominate life, that once served as an essential religious precept, encouraging enlightenment. "There is nothing so defective, unfinished, abortive and imperfect that since it has a formal principle, it does not likewise have a soul, even if it does not possess the act of substance which we describe as animal." Wrote Giordano Bruno in 1582 before being burned alive as a heretic in 1600.

The title of this exhibition, *I Am Food I Eat the Eater of Food*, is taken from the Indian *Taittiriya Upanishad* intended to be chanted or sung like a mantra:

"Oh, wonderful! Oh, wonderful! Oh, wonderful!

I am food! I am food! I am food!

I am a food-eater! I am a food-eater! I am a food-eater!

I am a fame-maker! I am a fame-maker! I am a fame-maker!

I am the first-born of the world order, earlier than the gods, in the naval of immortality!

Who gives me away, he has indeed aided me!

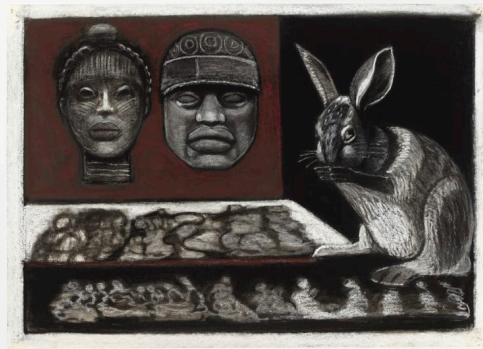
I, who am food, eat the eater of food! I have overcome the whole world!

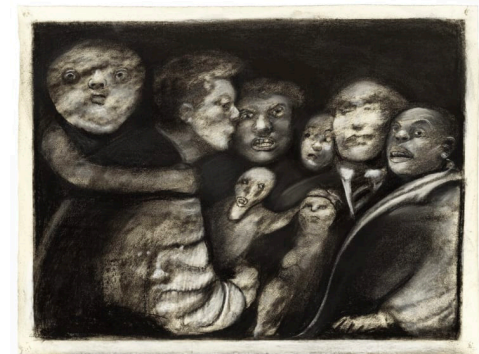
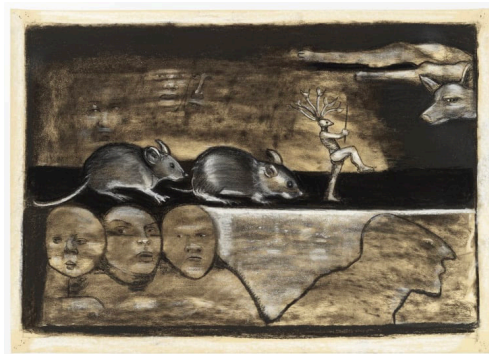
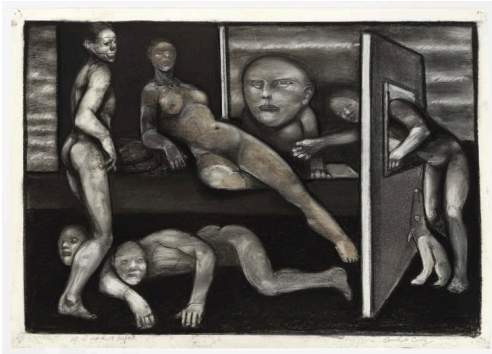
He who knows this has a brilliantly shining light.

Such is the mystic doctrine!"

- Emilio Cruz, 2004

PLATES





*Memorial Service
in Tribute to*

*Emilio
Cruz*

1938-2004

*St Mark's Church in-the-Bowery
New York City*

Sunday, January 23, 2005

EMILIO: A EULOGY BY AMIRI BARAKA

Say I knew Emilio Cruz over forty years. That seems right. Maybe more, I don't want to seem too old. But then to be really on it, specific, I'd say I knew Emilio best when I lived down here among the Dangs. And him every other day or so, him, William White, Bob Thompson, and I'd have to throw in Joe Overstreet. Notice I sd throw. We was tight. My man Vincent Smith I'd known longer than any of these dudes except White. But vision this bunch as Arty Bloods I was closest to. Some of yall knew this little knot of talking talking cussing cussing signifying signifying, laughing, yes laughin laughin Negroes. Yeh we used to laugh. At any and every, why cause think about it like this, if we wasn't gonna laugh we wd da had to kill a buncha folks, I mean daily.

Of this group Emilio had the most violent, or say the most artistic disposition. Some negroes wanted to shoot dope, some wanted to get drunk or suck they knuckles, some wanted to wheez when they was laughing and take the nut line in any conversation. And some just wanted to knock somebody out. Not just fight, but knock em out.

Emilo and I was athletes. The rest of them dudes cdnt play anything but they mouth, and that smoking Art they was turning out. But me and Emilio style ourselves fantasy Olympians. Me I cd play anything. Hear that. But where me and Emilio used to get down was playing baseball or softball.

Every Sunday we would go to some field somewhere in the West Village, with a bunch of other painters and poets and play at least one nine inning game of softball. Then go somewhere and admire ourselves with a drink. And Emilio could play. He was a short stop most times. Fast, slick, not as slick as he thought he was, but slicker than most of us. He'd stick that apple wheel around and fling it to first base, then pop his fist in the glove, wham. Dig that. Get that, somebitch, you dig! "Yeh!" we'd shout.

But the one thing about Emilio that I'd never forget and if you know his work, his art, you probably can sense it. Maybe. But Emilio had the worst, the quickest, and the most consistently explosive temper of any creature in Cristendom. In fact, part of my weekly gig was pulling Emilio off some ill fated lame who had ventured an opinion Emilio took as too ignorant to be accidental, or some affront, real imagined or unspoken, and boomaloom. Emilio would be on them like Lon Chaney, Jr, Full Moon style.

See, a lot of you folks didn't know one of my early gigs was as Kofi Annan of the Lower East Side. And people used to wonder why Emilio was to quickly, urgently violent. Some people used wonder that about me, as drawn to peace as I was. The under theme is that the violence, in word and deed, was as an honest replication, a forthright reflection of the place itself.

Remember, all this is pre-Malcolm. This is right about the time Dr King and them walked that walk in Montgomery, a minute or so before Fidel Castro y Lost Barbudos lit up Havana with the light of self determination. And all of us, at least the folks I valued most, were leaning into that rhythm, were feeling those vibes even then. We was being whatever skewed version of the near future we could pick up there, here in the craziness jungle of the lower east side Greenwich village usa.

Even much later when I wd check Emilio's violently striking work, human beings assaulted/absorbed by animals, truncated into inanimate subjects, or having their heads and bodies punctured by giant nails, it confirmed for me the negotiated rhythms by which we moved and lived among the so called great artists and intellectuals of the planet. Whether it came out of our mouths, on our canvases, in our scripts, or right there on the baseball field or Cedar tavern, where ever we might be accosted by the foolishness of illegitimate domination.

But then, I remember next, and actually deepest, Emilio's howling laugh, like an all-clear signal after an airraid. Especially that was something among the talking talking talking, arting arting arting, laughing laughing dudes that we was. That was daylight confirmation of our intelligence and love for each other and all that was worthwhile, to us, in the world.

So the idea that now there is only Overstreet and me from that bunch makes me need to hear Emilio laugh again. Makes me understand very very clearly the huge nails stuck in the black dude's skull. The head poking out from under some phantasmagorically outsized thumb.

What we were prefaces to was own growth, & the past which remains alive as a confirmation that we understand ourselves. In that craven haven of the informally insane, we had to thrive, to stay alive, and so we used our selves in ways that were like our soul's demanding, yet to breathe, no matter the ghost who clutched at us was wholly un-

For my man, & from the underseen trap door of our immortal nexus, we were taught on the street, with our hearts and by what we loved, to be always opposite of silly silent Negro Nuts. Our nuts was made from stuff in the sky. They was them. We was not brilliant, we became more than that & so like our best Fathers, could still Shine!

No, when they wants to go off & check unseen, it makes it difficult to make young whip snappers believe you know what u talking about!

Now that funny laugh!

In these scramble of words, we was the movement becoming itself as whatever aspect of itself it could then muster. Even your Eulogist has some parable of rep for quick draw mouth & tong & hammer. To be ourselves before we cd as we were becoming, past that where, but on it, going to it and so to see Emilio's mature work was pre-understood by us from his projection of himself way back.

Dig?

A person's life, said Keats, "is an allegory."

Later.

What some folks, whom others could rightfully claim were "brilliant," miss is that Emilio was not harsh, he was intolerant with misunderstanding of the obvious. And this trait endeared him to me and me to him. We were thrust into your "discourse" from reality whether you have a value for it or not. This could cause an indiscretion of a fantasy or naïve politic.

Plus there was, nor is, no conceit too great for us to challenge with the measure of our own emotionally held intellectual winnowing of bullshit our then still developing, later more fully constructed organic, instant disperser of jive.

And the lames (presidents and/or worlds) which use that to travel. Emilio knows what I mean.

See you later, man...in a minute, actually!

[2004]