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RACE STORIES

Artists of Color as Avatars of Originality and Brilliance

Elia Alba reimagines artists of color as A-list celebrities, giving them a place of honor in a mainstream art world that continues to ignore or downplay their accomplishments.



Elia Alba, *The Botanist (Lina Puerta)*, 2012.

Photographs by Elia Alba | Text by Maurice Berger

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A glamorous woman, dressed in jeans, a shirt and a vest, looks into the camera. Her full-on Afro and styling are retro, a homage, perhaps, to 1970s Blaxploitation stars like Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson. But one telling detail, the high-school yearbook she is holding, reminds us that the image is more than a fashion photograph. The school's location, Braddock, Pa., is the struggling hometown of the subject, LaToya Ruby Frazier.

Elia Alba photographed Ms. Frazier, an artist, on an ornate staircase at the Braddock Carnegie Library. Ms. Alba thinks the image alludes not to movie stars but to a political

figure: Kathleen Cleaver of the Black Panther Party. In this context, the portrait honors Ms. Frazier as the “patron saint of Braddock,” as Ms. Alba calls her — an activist photographer who uses art for social change. In “The Notion of Family,” her 2014 book, for example, Ms. Frazier photographed her own family to document the decline of a once-flourishing steel town and the lives of its residents, largely African-American, beset by poverty, gentrification and discrimination.



Elia Alba - Left: *The Braddonian* (LaToya Ruby Frazier), 2012. Center: *The Explorer* (Dawit L. Petros), 2015. Right: Elia Alba, *The American*, after Sidibé (Louis Cameron), 2015.

The photograph is in her new book, “Elia Alba: The Supper Club” (The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation/Hirmer), edited by Sara Reisman with George Bolster and Anjali Nanda, which documents Ms. Alba’s project, reimagining artists of color as A-list celebrities.

Ms. Alba is influenced by art history, Afro-futurist aesthetics and contemporary media, and her fantasy portraits echo spreads in *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and other glamour magazines. “Fashion photography is fascinating to me due to its construction of image; the likeness is real time but it’s completely hyper-real with many elements of fantasy,” she said in a recent interview. But Ms. Alba also acknowledged that mainstream publications have historically ignored or marginalized people of color and, still do.

Riffing on *Vanity Fair*’s “Hollywood Issue,” Ms. Alba assigns artists literary names that describe their philosophy, sensibility or reputation — “The Alchemist,” for example, or “The Oracle” — and photographs them in environments reflective of their art. She designs costumes and either constructs sets or photographs her subjects on location, and she adopts the visual devices of posing and styling common to the publications that inspired her. But her interests transcend fashion.

“These portraits go beyond merely a record of the subject,” she wrote in an artist’s

statement, and convey “a deeper meaning or vision of the sitter, through their art.” Arnaldo Morales (“The Machinist”), for example, is posed against the machines and gadgets that inspire his futuristic sculptures. Maren Hassinger (“The Spiritualist”) appears as a dancing Orisha in the forest, echoing her themes of spirituality and nature. And a series of portraits represents artists who challenge conventional notions of masculinity, including Angel Otero (“The Romantic”), whose paintings recast the male body as sensual and vulnerable, and Kalup Linzy (“The Star”), sultry in drag as Marlene Dietrich.



Elia Alba, *The Dreamweaver* (Chitra Ganesh), 2013.



Elia Alba, *The Professor* (Hank Willis Thomas), 2014.



Elia Alba, *The Thespian* (Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz), 2014.

Ms. Alba’s project also relates to the history of artists who use other artists as their subjects. At the height of the New York School in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the photographer Hans Namuth made many such portraits. Much like Ms. Alba, his pictures

were stylish and glamorous, displaying a sensibility rooted in his training with Alexey Brodovitch, the renowned art director of Harper's Bazaar. Typically depicting his subjects in their studios, Mr. Namuth described his photographic process as akin to "the feeling of being in a theater, of watching and directing." But his portraits, unlike those of "The Supper Club," were neither theatrical nor art directed.

While "The Supper Club" both perpetuates and challenges this legacy, it rejects one sensibility inherent to these projects: their view of the art world as largely white. It highlights the accomplishments of contemporary artists of color through work that also reflects the consequential issues engaged by their art. It does so not only through portraits but also a through series of dinners that Ms. Alba hosted — the "supper clubs" of the project's title — in which artists discussed the social, cultural and aesthetic issues reflected in their work and worldview.

Challenging the cliché of the artist as hermetic and socially insular, these dialogues explored the motivations and intentions of the participants as well as the impact of real-life events and issues on their lives and art. In the end, Ms. Alba's project — which recasts the artist's portrait as a complex reflection of artists and their work — underscores the interplay among persona, politics and aesthetics in much contemporary art.

If the typical celebrity portrait aggrandizes its subject, the photographs in "The Supper Club" give artists of color a place of honor in a mainstream art world that continues to ignore, underestimate or downplay their accomplishments. They honor these artists on multiple levels: as icons of originality and brilliance, as interpreters of a changing culture and society, and as role models for people long erased from the history of art. In the end, these vibrant portraits represent their subjects not simply as culturally expressive, but also as embodying the potential of a refreshed and relevant cultural world unencumbered by racism.



Elia Alba – Left: *The Poet (LaTasta N. Nevada Diggs)*, 2015.
Center: Elia Alba, *The Star (Kalup Linzy)*, 2015. Right: Elia Alba, *The Romantic (Angel Otero)*, 2015.

Race Stories is a continuing exploration of the relationship between race and photographic depictions of race by Maurice Berger. He is a research professor and chief curator at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. This column is an edited excerpt from the author's essay in "Elia Alba: The Supper Club."