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Noah Becker's

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David Antonio Cruz: The Return of the Dirty Boys

By Kurt Mcvey April 2016



David Antonio Cruz, Bang Bang All Over the Floor, 2016, oil on canvas

David Antonio Cruz still screams. “I feel like I’ve been silenced all these years,” says the Philly born painter, performer and mixed media artist, who is currently celebrating the end of his extended residency with Project For Empty Space [at] Gateway Project Spaces in Newark, New Jersey with a highly layered and thoroughly fabulous solo exhibition titled, *For I am-or I was, thereturnofthedirtyboys*, opening April 6th. Screaming can be cathartic, as is the case for Cruz

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during many of his unique, passionate and highly physical performance pieces, such as “How to Order Chocolate Cake” which he performed most famously on New York City’s Highline as tourists and wayward strollers watched the proudly queer, Puerto Rican-American artist caress and lather thick gobs of chocolate syrup all over his curvy, partially nude body in vogue-like ecstasy.

The screams, when they come, still surprise the sweet and seemingly cuddly Cruz, an oft soft-spoken Yale MFA grad with a booming, infectious laugh up his sleeve. Even though we’ve recently made great strides in the advancement of LGBT rights here in America, most notably last year’s federal approval of same-sex marriage, we can still be blindsided, startled even, by political maneuvering built upon the foundation of fear and ignorance, as is the case with a recently passed law (HB2) in North Carolina that effectively bars local governments from extending certain civil rights to gay and transgender people. So yes, in a culture of blind imposition, the screams still come.

Money talks, and several corporations are now aggressively pulling out of North Carolina, most recently PayPal, who seeks to deny the state a planned 3.6 Million dollar deal that would have created upwards of 400 jobs. More baffled is the creative community, as actors, production houses (Lionsgate, A+E), dirty dancers, artists and directors choose to deny the state the potent and highly creative juices that flow through their collective, sensitive hearts, minds, bodies and souls. It’s in the shadow of such careless disregard for basic human rights that an art exhibit like *For I am-or I was, the return of the dirty boys* not only thrives, but feels immediate and essential. The show prominently features various portraits of dynamic, real world, gender-fluid people of color, mostly contemporaries and friends of Cruz, who openly identify as members of the queer community. More importantly, most of his subjects, much like the artist himself, directly improve conditions for said community. In Cruz’ works, as in life it seems, they are tortured, exalted, tortured, exalted, tortured, and so on.

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“I like to put them in difficult poses,” says Cruz with a slight mischievous giggle. “They trust that I’m going to find that thing that radiates within them—that beauty you’re projecting. You’re going to look good, I promise you. But you’re also going to suffer.” Cruz is self aware enough to know that this sentiment stands in parallel to the daily lives of many humans in the LGBT community and also people of color, who bare the daily flagellations, trials and tribulations, but do so gracefully. Be uncomfortable, but make it look good.

In what could be the show’s definitive work, “soletthemeatasylumpink,” Cruz poses his two muses, Randy Harris and Ian Marrero, life-long plutonic friends, in a punishing and highly erotic pose that makes a direct allusion to Balthus’ “The Guitar Lesson.” Where Balthus makes bizarre cartoon flesh puppets out of his subjects, Cruz turns them into luminous inter-dimensional beings, posing in front of a subtle, two-tone (warm, cold) pink background. “When I think about pink paint, it’s either for a little girl’s room or it’s an asylum,” says Cruz, further situating his subjects in a setting soft, abstract, fractured prison of the mind and of the self. One panel actually juts out of the wall on an angle, homage to Francis Bacon, who often played with the architecture of the canvas as well as the figure. “He [Bacon] doesn’t articulate the space, but often makes subtle references to a room collapsing, closing, or colliding in on the figures,” notes Cruz. “I like seeing my subjects slipping from the pedestal, or climbing back onto it, all in an infinite room with no edges.”

Why Asylum? Well, homosexuality was and in many places around the globe still is treated like a mental illness. Oscar Wilde is a massive influence on the artist. In fact, it’s difficult not to think of Cruz should one delight in pondering what Dorian Gray’s creator would have accomplished if he chose the brush and not the pen. Men like Wilde were ultimately treated like inconveniences, embarrassments, anomalies to be hidden, disposed of. Much like modern gays in places like Saudi Arabia’s city of Jiddah, where government prosecutors are at this very moment pushing for the swift execution of gays as dozens continue to be jailed for sodomy. Why the break in the

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panel? It is an illusion to that frantic moment of no return, something many women, people of color and those in the queer community reach at some point in their lives. “There is always a break, a true psychotic moment,” says Cruz. “It can be terrifying, but it can also be the one place you can finally relax and experience your true self.”

For Cruz, this break came while he was a freshman at Pratt Institute. Clearly struggling with identity, grasping for it even, the school’s Dean of the Library, F. William Chickering recommended the young artist read two books: *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin and Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar*, two stories about developing men struggling with their homosexuality and living through a moment fixed in time—a sexual rendezvous that would forever change them. As Cruz notes, “Nothing affects us more than memories.”

Before Pratt, Cruz spent much of his time growing up in Philadelphia figuring out how to function and how to fit in. Feeling unsafe and distracted in public school, he was accepted into the Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. “I remember the Head of the Art Department for the Board of Ed., Mr. Bacon, joking about how we Puerto Ricans have a really hard time leaving our neighborhoods,” Cruz says with a laugh and a playful eye roll. It was a difficult leap for Cruz, but he made it.

One day, while on a Salvador Dali research binge at his new school, Cruz discovered the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, who was famously assassinated. “I picked up a book containing his last 11 works, many of which were banned for upwards of fifty years. I couldn’t quite make sense of it until much later. They were really mature pieces that spoke about sex in a very secret, fascinating, beautiful way.” It was only until many years later, while rehearsing for his wonderful and highly emotional Lorca inspired performance piece “green, howiwantyougreen” that the artist thought, “Oh god, now I get it.” Cruz will perform this piece live at The Gateway Projects exhibition space on April 23rd.

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For I am-or I was, the return of the dirty boys, the exhibit, despite showcasing Cruz's joyous and at times aggressive flare for performance as well as thoughtful works of mixed media collage and some video and sculptural installation (all focused on the movement of the body), one is drawn back into the paintings, which as simple, silent objects can serve as catalysts for real change. In "it's not that serious it's just one of your little princesses" a painting featuring Eduardo Ayala Fuentes, an associate at El Museo del Barrio who helped facilitate the addition of Cruz' stellar portrait of himself lying shirtless on the lap of his mother (his favorite muse and toughest critic), "Puerto Rican Pieta" to the museum's private collection. Cruz was so moved he asked Fuentes to pose and play the contortionist and as you will undoubtedly agree, magic was made. More telling of art's power however, is the fact that Fuentes was doubly moved, so much so he asked El Museo to walk as a collective unit in New York City's world-famous Gay Pride Parade. They accepted and were the first museum to openly do so. When Fuentes called David Antonio Cruz and invited him to walk, he was surprised to discover the artist had never taken part in the parade. "I came here twenty years ago," Cruz begins, reflecting for a moment. "I learned everything about me here in NY. I learned I was stronger and more honest than I ever thought I was. All the years hiding, you think you're going to live that way. I felt so much pride when I walked that day, knowing what it was like to live and not by certain rules or expectations, but just to own yourself and be truthful. I still remember what that moment tastes like."