

'They don't come with rules': David Antonio Cruz celebrates queer chosen families

The Philadelphia-born artist has created a new exhibition focused on the importance of chosen families within the LGBTQ+ community

Veronica Esposito/Tue 15 Aug 2023 06.18 EDT



David Antonio Cruz - today,tomorrow,andyesterday; maybe we'll find a way holding the sun, 2019 Photograph: ICA/David Antonio Cruz/Monique Meloche Gallery

"Chosen family are the folks that love you undeniably, unconditionally," artist David Antonio Cruz tells the Guardian. "They don't come with restrictions or rules." He's been thinking about chosen family a lot lately, as his new solo show at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania is all about tracing his steps back to the non-biological family that has nurtured him. When the Children Come Home marks a long overdue return to his hometown, the celebrated artist's first-ever solo show in the city that raised him.

"It's very special to have a solo exhibition in Philadelphia," Cruz said. "Home can mean many things, and sometimes home is challenging. It's a choice and coming back meant that I wanted to think about the city and its impact on me. This is where it began, it's really beautiful."

Bringing together more than 20 paintings and drawings from two decades of Cruz's career, as well as a special sanctuary room filled by the artist with furniture, wallpaper, ephemera and even chandeliers, When the Children Come Home offers a very personal, exuberant collection of work very much in tune with the landscape so familiar to the artist. "I really wanted to think about the impact on me of Philadelphia itself."

The show is centered around glorious portraits of LGBTQ+ individuals cuddling, laying atop one another and inhabiting space together in intriguing ways. The fashion here is as languorous as the posing, with white fishnets, zebra-print, voluminous skirts and purple pants, among others. The overall impression of these works is one of joy and gratitude, combined with peace, contemplation and defiance.



The show is centered around glorious portraits of LGBTQ+ individuals cuddling, laying atop one another, and inhabiting space together in intriguing ways. Photograph: ICA/David Antonio Cruz/Monique Meloche Gallery

Cruz shared that from a very young age he knew that his life's work would be in creating art. "It's the one thing that I really loved from a young age," he said. "It became almost like a private language, a way of saying things that were very private. I still think about some of the earlier things that I was making. It was a way for me to get out the things that I needed to say."

The child of parents who migrated from Puerto Rico, Cruz found early community by going to Saturday classes where he began to learn how to make art. "Being around other people who wanted to do art, it was like finding my tribe. I felt really safe." Cruz's life reached a turning point when he decided to attend grad school in art and devote

himself wholeheartedly to creation. "Once I decided to go to grad school and really leave everything behind, I felt like this is it."

As he began to build up a following and found that his work resonated with others, it reassured Cruz that he was going in the right direction. "When you have an audience engaging with your work, when the critics are writing about the work, you realize, 'OK, I'm saying something that people want to hear, I'm on the right path.'"

Cruz's work tends to center Black and brown queer individuals, and he explores how notions of family intersect with conversations around race and queerness. After getting his MFA from Yale, Cruz began branching out as a creator, experimenting with painting, video and sound works. Throughout the years his work has veered toward politics and conversations of the moment – a 2019 Chicago-based exhibition, *One Day I'll Turn the Corner and I'll Be Ready For It*, found the artist exhibiting pieces that included immigrants caught up amid the standoff around immigration at the US-Mexico border.

Cruz told me his latest project grew out of the enforced separation that came about during Covid pandemic lockdowns. "This project began as a response to the pandemic and what was going on," he said. "I was feeling very isolated. The spaces where we gathered were closed. It was important to document these things that weren't being talked about. This is our safety net, this is how we create home. There's the possibility of being homeless, the possibility of not being loved by your biological family, the possibility of being harassed – this is how we create love without limit and without rules."

By creating the work for *When the Children Come Home*, Cruz was able to reconnect with members of his chosen family in deep and profound ways. For Cruz, sitting for a portrait is a prolonged, involved act of dialogue that begins in conversation about queerness. "I like to have a dinner or a party to get to know folks so we can talk," said Cruz. "I start with a long conversation about the history, so that they understand why I'm doing it. We talk a lot about fashion and how we perform ourselves."

From there, the painting itself is bound up with play, with lots of space for dress up and trying on various versions of self. Posing itself is not passive but rather participatory and, hopefully, fun. "The way you pose for me isn't just sitting, there's this sense of dripping, of leaning; we're performing and being extra, and for me that's the radical part, that's the joy of being non-conforming and not falling into rules."

The deep connection with the meaning of chosen family and the playfulness of queerness comes through in the work shown in *When the Children Come Home*, which shows bodies in postures at once surprising yet also undeniably comfortable. One of the subjects of *thoseboysdonteverplaynice* is virtually falling off of a couch, yet their gaze (like most in these works) remains locked on the viewer, their face bearing a look of strength and solemnity that belies their off-kilter pose. In *eachdaywecarvedeachmoment* ... the subjects are lying head-to-foot, grabbing one other's legs in a pose that is equally energetic and coy in its indifference. There is a layer of performance, of feinting and dodging, even as the subjects' personalities poke through.



David Antonio Cruz - Puerto Rican Pieta en la calle de la Fortaleza, 2006. Photograph: ICA/David Antonio Cruz/Monique Meloche Gallery

When the Children Come Home also features a special room furnished and decorated by Cruz. It has 32 chandeliers that are bedazzled and covered in brooches and pearls, and the room's wallpaper is a mural of Philadelphia. For Cruz, this is meant to be a space of respite for those who visit the exhibition. "I really wanted to think about Sunday church. The whole space is mapping out a sanctuary, a place of meditation and quietness. I wanted a place where people could walk and just enjoy."

At a time when queerness is under assault, the bonds of chosen family stand as crucial ways to remain strong and free. For Cruz, it comes down to making visible what is often only known to a select few, and to embody that joy that comes with finding your people. "It's important to talk about the diversity and gamut of chosen family," he said. "The joy, the celebration isn't always talked about. We're not given that narrative or allowed to have joy. It's so beautiful to see people celebrate."

When the Children Come Home is on view at the ICA in Philadelphia from 18 August until 17 December