# ’I want people to feel the essence of what is ephemeral versus what is permanent; what is important versus what is not.’

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José Luis Cortés, “Little Town with Big Vistas” (2006)

Visual AIDS artist member José Luis Cortés decribes his exhibition En Blanco y Negro: Gay y Boricua to Philadelphia-based arts writer Alex Fiorentino below.

En Blanco y Negro: Gay y Boricua is part of Philadelphia's citywide celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Reminder Day celebration of the LGBT civil rights movement. The project has been coordinated by GALAEI and El Taller Puertorriqueño. David Acosta, longtime activist and founder of GALAEI, is also a member of the Taller board of directors. He saw a web gallery I curated for Visual Aids in 2013, It Feels Like Love, but it's the Drugs,and he became interested in my work. He presented my work to El Taller and GALAEI as a possibility to take part of this year's big LGBT celebration. I have been working for over a year with curator Rafael Dasmat, putting together the exhibition, which includes over 30 art works, photographs, videos, paintings and performance, including "Living in the Grid," my June 12 live performance.

I have heard about El Taller for over 15 years as the leading Latino cultural center in Philly and always wanted to show there. When Rafael Dasmat contacted me I was beyond myself. I was born in the same neighborhood north of Philly and lived there for my first three years before moving to Puerto Rico with my family. Coming back almost 50 years later as part of this collaboration with GALAEI and El Taller as a gay and puertoriqueño was beyond what I had envisioned. Staying in North Philly and walking around the neighborhood where I had come from was really nice. I identified with the community because it was very familiar. To return to Philadelphia as an artist and an educator is something I never imagined.

Actually the paintings I showed at the Visual AIDS exhibition The First Ten in 1995, 20 years ago, are an integral part of my current exhibition, En Blanco y Negro: Gay y Boricua. It was part of an installation and performance.

My artistic process when I paint begins by taking pictures, lots of them. I take pictures of people that I am attracted to because of the way they look or the way they are or what they do, and photos of buildings from the 1950s and 1960s that are dilapidated and abandoned. Once in my studio I start going through my newspaper collection until one of the photos and one of the pages calls my attention and then the process of painting begins using the photo to paint on the newspaper page or pages. I select the elements because of color, text or images because I only paint with black and white paint. All the color you see on my paintings comes from the color already on the newsprint.

I want people to feel surprised, sadness, love, pleasure, loneliness. I want people to feel the essence of what is ephemeral versus what is permanent; what is important versus what is not. I love traveling through the lines between painting, performance and video. I want people to experience what I experience when I have encounters with art; Art that moves me and gives me a sense that I have entered a unique and very personal microcosm. I'm feeling blessed by seeing the results and feeling the consequence of having a brand-new experience that creates wonderful memories.

On the first day of youth workshops and educational programming around the exhibition, we

started with a guided tour, walking through the gallery and then the murals and gardens. One of my goals was to split them into two groups of young men and women, wishing they were different as they were also similar and ending up with one group of Latinos making art and working together on portrait and identity. After that, I asked them to take someone from the group they didn't know and make a portrait of each other (black-and-white, pencil and paper). It was really cool seeing them get to know each other. Using newspapers and magazines to create a work of art, hoping it would speak about their likes and dislikes while creating a conceptual portrait of them. I wanted to get them involved with the news. Some got political, which was one of my goals.

On the second day, I asked participants to collect newspaper, magazines and other materials, to create self-portrait collages combining text and images, to show what they like, don't like, and feel strongly about. Then, I had them do ransom-letter writing, to take a phrase. They started working right away, completely silent, and it was magic because they were so engaged. The third day was hectic. A lot of them were rushing to finish, but Daniel (de Jesus) was very good and let them. The work was shown at (GALAEI's) Alternative Prom for the LGBT kids where GALAEI organized an alternative space for LGBT youth and the artworks were displayed at this event. A lot went in drag, and there was lots of food and music; it very cool. I was more than pleased with the final outcome of the final self-portraits as well as the way the two groups integrated into one at the end.

Then there was the panel discussion, "A Gay Latino Perspective," moderated by Juan David Acosta with contributions from panelists José Luis Cortés, artist; Elicia Gonzales, Executive Director of GALAEI; Erika Guadalupe Núñes, artist and community organizer; Emmanuel Coreano, a youth member at GALAEI; Bella,a trans* identifying youth who is passionate about the Queer community; and Louie A. Ortiz from The Gran Varones Project. It included some conversation about gay marriage, and how it is part of the white gay male agenda. (The head of GALALEI) said that "marriage equality is not the great equalizer, but it is a starting point." Then they talked about gay immigrants in the United States, then about transgender issues. That is what interested me the most. I was made more conscious about the condition of trans people. The trans community does not feel accepted by the gay community. I really admire these young (trans) people, these activists. It's great to see these young people standing for their own.

Like a dry sponge, these organizations are like water. There is so much need. They are like a home to these kids, where they hang out and meet mentors and artists. There is a sense of community and role models, with the art and the prom. I noticed Daniel coordinated with them, with art, with music. It provides a support system.

--As told to Alex Fiorentino

Alex Fiorentino is an art writer and historian based in Philadelphia.He received his BA in art history from the Tyler School of Art last year, with a focus on art of the late 20th century. He writes for theartblog.org and is extremely excited to be working with Visual AIDS.

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