

Seeing Eldzier Cortor

Eldzier Cortor died on Thanksgiving Day, 2015, about seven months after I interviewed him. He was ninety-nine years old. According to his son Michael, Cortor worked as an artist up until the day he died.

The *New York Times* ran a generous obituary of Cortor, which included a photograph of him, sitting upright and bow-tied, taken by the photojournalist Gordon Parks in 1949. This photograph presented Cortor just after winning a Guggenheim fellowship, which would take him to Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti. The *Times* also ran a front-page story titled “Black Artists and the March into the Museum,” in which Cortor was featured, and which included several short video-interviews with black artists.¹ An assessment of black art in the twentieth-century art market, the *Times* piece underscored a bittersweet irony in the age of modernist formalism during which Cortor and other artists developed their careers. If a black artist chose to work in a figurative mode, then his or her work was likely to be pigeonholed by the white establishment as expressive of the “black experience.” But if he or she chose to work in abstraction, then this work did not fit the category of “black art” as conceived by the country’s leading museums.

Has the art world caught up with the idea that modernism was many things? Cortor—whose range of work is difficult to classify—remained skeptical. In one of the videos that accompanied the *Times* piece, the interviewer suggests that Cortor is now finally getting “an immense amount of recognition.” Cortor gently interrupts: “Now you say that, you see. But I don’t know that, you see.”

You see: here is Cortor’s verbal tic. It struck me as appropriate. Seeing and being seen, of course, have provided dominant metaphors for understanding African American identity, from W. E. B. Du Bois’s concepts of visibility—including “the Veil” and “second-sight”—to one of the most memorable opening lines in American literature: “I am an invisible man,” says Ralph Ellison’s unnamed narrator in the novel of that name. The symbolism is clear: Will the complexity and range of black identity be acknowledged in American culture?

If Cortor is still an underappreciated artist, then the past few years have at least seen some high-profile recognition of Cortor's significance to the history of American art.² The 2015 inaugural show of the new downtown Whitney Museum—aptly titled “America is Hard to See”—included two of Cortor's detailed woodcuts among over six hundred artworks drawn from the museum's permanent collection. In these woodcuts—both titled *L'Abattoire* (1955–1958)—segments of deeply colored ink suggest human bodies, though the works do not necessarily allude to any specific scene of slaughter, as Cortor reminded me.

And yet, in the Whitney's new “A to Z” *Handbook of the Collection* (2016), Cortor's work does not appear. Perhaps his absence is unsurprising in a publication that was forced to limit the work of more than three thousand artists to 350 inside a portable softcover book.³ But at the Whitney, I could not help reflecting on Cortor and the slow process of transforming the “white spaces” of art museums into welcoming and diverse public spheres.⁴ Certainly, the enormous new Whitney building designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano aims at inclusion—from the outdoor plaza on the ground floor to the many windows and open-air exhibition spaces that overlook the meatpacking district of New York. The nine-story cantilevered building—like a piece of sculpture itself—offers striking vistas of the Hudson River to the west, and in other directions a dense zone of restaurants, boutiques, galleries, and global *flâneurs* walking the High Line. The museum admirably extends itself into the neighborhood in which it has been built, but this area of Manhattan itself feels like a museum of expensive objects, where the traffic on 10th Avenue is itself an art installation, to be viewed from the High Line's stadium seats.

Perhaps the museums of Chicago will never feel quite so globally self-conscious, even inside the beautiful, light-filled Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), opened in 2009 and also designed by Renzo Piano. In early 2015, the AIC presented a focused exhibition of Cortor's prints titled “Eldzier Cortor Coming Home,” not in the Modern Wing but in a gallery within the museum's 1893 Beaux Arts building. To be sure, this is a building that Cortor knew well, a “home” in the sense that it was where Cortor trained to be a professional artist. Cortor enrolled as a full-time student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1935: he studied the museum's vast collection

and took revelatory courses in art history from Kathleen Blackshear, who exposed her students to both Western and African traditions of art and also encouraged visits to the nearby Field Museum of Natural History.⁵ The AIC exhibition celebrated Cortor's technical virtuosity, including his skill with *intaglio*: a process by which a metal plate is carved with a sharp tool and incisions take ink; then the surface of the plate is wiped clean and dampened paper is pressed with a roller on top of the plate. An image is produced from sunken ink. Printmaking becomes fantastically modern through Cortor's modulations of vivid color, his play with forms that are neither figurative nor purely abstract.

This balance was also on display at a small show of Cortor's work in the fall of 2014, which took place at an historic institution in Chicago—the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC). The only surviving art center of the Works Progress Administration, the SSCAC was founded in 1940 by Cortor and his fellow artist and organizer Margaret Burroughs, with the help of numerous artists and intellectuals in Bronzeville. Cortor donated many works of art for this 2014 exhibition in order to support the center, which is still a grassroots organization despite its significant role in the careers of many now-famous artists, musicians, photographers, and writers. Here in 1941 Gwendolyn Brooks and other young black writers took a poetry class from legendary teacher Inez Cunningham Stark; here Gordon Parks had his first darkroom in the center's basement; and here Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett shared their SAIC training with other artists who could not afford art school.⁶ At the center, Cortor's work looked almost familiar, in the way a work of art might seem more approachable in a home, where there is neither an admission fee nor a description of the work on a museum label.

Originally an old brownstone redesigned by architects of the New Bauhaus, the SSCAC feels worlds apart from the new Whitney Museum or even from the Art Institute just a few miles north. No longer is this Bronzeville street bustling and middle-class; one lot next door and another across the street are vacant. Inside the center, floorboards creak in the central wood-paneled gallery. When I was there to see Cortor's work, visitors introduced themselves to one another, and we exchanged thoughts about the range of Cortor's paintings and prints on display. On one of the walls hung a series of etchings, including *Trilogy No. II, Verso* (undated), which depicts two crimson torsos,

horizontal and vertical (see p. 137). These torsos seem held in suspension against other mottled shapes, evoking pieces of rock set to be sculpted. After looking for a long time at this piece, what I see now is the negative space, the organic geometry between bodies, edged by arms and legs. Perhaps all compelling works of art engage the eye differently over time, and expand one's capacity to see. For me, this is certainly true of Cortor's work.

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When I interviewed Cortor, I had been seeing his work for just a few years. In the course of doing research for a book about Chicago modernism, I discovered that Cortor was still living, and I was anxious to learn what he might remember from the time when he lived in Chicago, a period of creative ferment during the 1930s and 1940s now known as the Chicago Black Renaissance.⁷

One dazzling painting on permanent display at the AIC, in particular, seems to express an intimate understanding of Chicago during this period, which was defined by the demographic shifts of the Great Migration. Millions of blacks fled the South in the decades following the First World War, pushed by white supremacy and pulled by opportunities in the Northern industrial economy—especially in the stockyards, railroads, and steel mills. They transformed Chicago's black community from a dispersed population of about 44,000 in 1910 to a densely packed neighborhood of 377,000 residents by 1944.⁸ Inhabitants of the South Side neighborhood of Bronzeville were hemmed in by the city's racist, restrictive housing covenants, but they were also emboldened by their community's quest for economic and cultural self-determination.

Completed in 1948, *The Room No. VI* depicts long, thin bodies that stretch for space, sharing a pink-buttoned mattress and brightly patterned sheets (see p. 124).⁹ The frame of the painting cuts off the legs and arms of the figures. Strewn on the floor are pages of a newspaper, an old milk bottle, and a pulp magazine—a blond pin-up on the cover. Contrasting with the overall gleaming precision of the painting, thick impasto gives three-dimensional texture to a few areas: a milk bottle, the stovepipe, and the curly hair of the women. Perhaps to underscore a relationship between white and black, a pink doll at the baseboard

raises its arm, signaling the cause of black deprivation. Indeed, the sheer presence of this doll—ugly but plump—against the painting’s central dark figures is suggestive of a radical disparity. The arm-raising gesture is indexical: it calls attention to itself. But the painting treats debased conditions—four people in one bed—with the intensity of a grand-scale history painting. Here is both impoverishment and epic grandeur.¹⁰

When I asked Cortor about this painting, he suggested, to my astonishment, that it seems visually connected to the cramped rooms described by Richard Wright in his best-selling 1940 novel *Native Son*. Cortor couldn’t remember the name of the novel’s protagonist Bigger Thomas, but he briskly recounted the novel’s many set-pieces: the group of young men at the pool hall hatching a robbery; Bigger’s gruesome murder of a white woman; the flight of Bigger “on the run.” And Cortor recalled how many people—“my people,” in his words—did not like the novel: Wright “hit on certain things, you see,” Cortor told me, “that people didn’t want to hear.” Middle-class blacks wished that Wright had affirmed black characters who were able to overcome their oppressive conditions. Racial uplift, Cortor suggested, was assumed to be the black artist’s responsibility.

Maybe racial uplift explains why Cortor committed himself to depicting beauty in the black body, even after his move to New York City during the thralls of abstract expressionism. A distinctive feature of Cortor’s work is the elongated female body, which resonates with forms of abstraction in African and Cubist art, in which Cortor was well versed through his training at the SAIC. Cortor was also attracted to the New Bauhaus in Chicago and the abstracted light creations of László Moholy-Nagy. As he put it, “They didn’t want you to have an art education” at the Institute of Design—it was all about the present—it was where “you became modern.” Indeed, Cortor experimented with abstraction while an art student, but he was worried about abstraction’s social implications. Influenced by his participation in the Works Progress Administration Federal Arts Project and his contact with the sociologist Horace Cayton, Jr., Cortor made a conscious decision to work in a more figurative mode. “I felt on the face of it, as a black, to be doing abstract—I just felt I couldn’t afford it, that it wouldn’t serve my purpose, to get over my message.”¹¹ To deliver a “message” as a visual artist was to work with forms that gesture, even if just slightly, to some form of figuration, a recognizable content.



Eldzier Cortor, *The Room No. VI*, 1948, oil and gesso on Masonite, 42 1/4 × 31 1/2 inches, 2007.329, The Art Institute of Chicago. Image © Estate of Eldzier Cortor. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.



Eldzier Cortor, *The Couple*, 1948, oil on Masonite, 28 × 22 inches, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. Image © Estate of Eldzier Cortor. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Cortor's choice may have been familiar to many of his Bronzeville peers. To my count, there are no abstract artists associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance.¹² The range of writers and artists who were part of this movement is vast, but certain figures stand out. Painter Archibald Motley, Jr., became well known for his sumptuous portraits and jazz scenes. Charles White achieved recognition for his masterful works of social realism—especially his WPA murals—that often depict the physical labor of African Americans. (Like Cortor, both Motley and White trained at the SAIC.) As for Cortor's literary cohort—which includes Frank Marshall Davis, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks—by the late 1930s, all of these writers were well-informed of the experimental aesthetic forms of transatlantic modernism, but they were a diverse, loose flock of followers. Despite an awareness of the “new,” writers of Bronzeville often chose familiar literary forms that were demonstrably more radical in sentiment and subject than in form. Perhaps with the exception of Brooks, originality lay in exposing their stories with unflinching fidelity to harsh social realities, especially conditions of black life in Chicago.

Which is to say, if there is a defining aesthetic of the Chicago Black Renaissance, then it might be identified as a tension that characterizes Chicago modernism more broadly: between a documentary impulse to narrate, *to tell a story*, and a modernist birthright that revels in stylistic experiment. The literary forms of the Chicago Black Renaissance might be traced back, in part, through the works of earlier Chicago writers—Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson—who observed the effects of rapid modernization, industrial capitalism, and increased mechanization upon everyday life.¹³ On the whole, abstraction and other forms of modernist play are often held in check by the pull of narrative realism (for writers) and figuration (for artists).

No artist better embodies this tension than Cortor. Mostly, it is a productive tension, though not all viewers are compelled by elements of Cortor's style that seem to date his particular fascinations: the surreal symbolism of his objects, or the art deco ornamentation around his dancing figures. When I interviewed Cortor, we sat in an upstairs room at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in Chelsea. Propped against the wall was Cortor's 1948 painting *The Couple*, which depicts the vividly colored heads of a woman and man against an iridescent rainbow of color, like disco lights (see p. 125). Several objects in the painting seem

heavily symbolic, as if a dream story awaiting interpretation: a sheet of newspaper creased over a light bulb; a green die hanging from the bulb's gold chain; diagonal folds of mosquito netting. At the end of our interview, Cortor and I looked at the work together, along with his son Michael and one of the gallery's senior associates. Apparently, the objects in the painting portend disaster. When I observed that the man in the painting was sleeping while the woman was wide awake, Cortor replied: "This woman is saying, 'I got to get the hell out of here!'"

For decades, Michael Rosenfeld has been showing the work of African American artists in exhibitions that illuminate the heterogeneity of twentieth-century aesthetic forms. When I interviewed Cortor, the gallery was exhibiting works by Alma Thomas: blasts of geometric color, vivid animate patterns. I learned later that Michelle Obama recently unveiled a work by Thomas in the White House dining room, *Resurrection* (1966), a stunning square canvas with a circular orb of comma-like colors. To reject a representation of the black body, of course, is its own politics, a choice to step beyond or away from the burden of representing race.

Absence, too, can also be acknowledgement. In one of the most provocative and beautifully written books of 2015, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that America was built upon the pillage and erasure of black bodies, from slavery up through the current prison-industrial complex. "Here is what I would like for you to know," Coates writes to his teenage son, to whom the book is addressed: "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*." Cortor's work speaks to this history; or rather, over many years, his work helps us to see it.

NOTES

1/ Randy Kennedy, “Black Artists and the March into the Museum,” *New York Times*, 29 November 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/design/black-artists-and-the-march-into-the-museum.html>.

2/ From December 2013 to March 2014, the San Antonio Museum of Art presented “Eldzier Cortor: Master Printmaker,” which, like the 2015 AIC exhibition, focused mostly on Cortor’s prints.

3/ For a discussion of the selection process for the handbook, see Dana Miller, “Defining ‘American,’” in *Whitney Museum of American Art: Handbook of the Collection*, ed. Dana Miller (New York: Whitney Museum, distributed by Yale University Press, 2015), 32–33.

4/ At the dedication of the new Whitney Museum in 2015, first lady Michelle Obama remarked: “You see, there are so many kids in this country who look at places like museums and concert halls and other cultural centers and they think to themselves, well, that’s not a place for me, for someone who looks like me, for someone who comes from my neighborhood. In fact, I guarantee you that right now, there are kids living less than a mile from here who would never in a million years dream that they would be welcome in this museum.” See the full transcript at www.whitehouse.gov.

5/ On Cortor’s training, see Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 272–279.

6/ On Inez Cunningham Stark, see my “Across Stark Lines” in *Centennial: A History of the Renaissance Society 1915–2015*, ed. Karen Reimer (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2016), 50–58. See also “Our Legacy” on the SSCAC’s website, www.sscartcenter.org.

7/ Robert Bone coined the term “Chicago Black Renaissance” in “Richard Wright and the Chicago Black Renaissance,” *Callaloo* 28 (Summer 1986), 446–468. The scholarship on the Chicago Black Renaissance is rapidly growing. Over the past decade and a half, key book-length studies have been written or edited by Davarian Baldwin, Robert Bone and Richard Courage, Brian Dolinar, Adam Green, Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey, Jr., Mary Hricko, Lawrence Jackson, Anne Meis Knupfer, Stacy Morgan, Bill Mullen, Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach, Jacqueline Stewart, and Steven Tracy.

8/ These are the figures given by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton in their landmark study, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1945), 8.

9/ Cortor’s *The Room No. VI* was included in the AIC’s 2013 exhibition

They Seek a City: Chicago and the Art of Migration 1910–1950, and now hangs permanently in the museum’s American Wing.

10/ I am indebted to Sarah Kelly Oehler’s interpretation of this painting in *They Seek a City: Chicago and the Art of Migration, 1910–1950* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2013), 81–84.

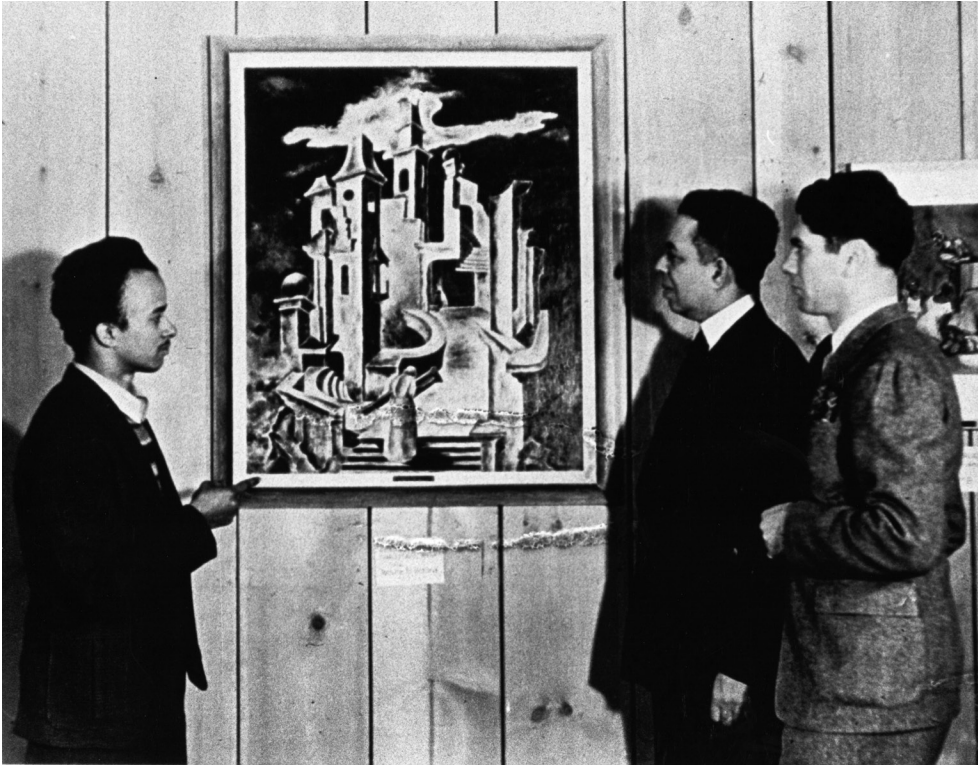
11/ Bearden and Henderson, *African-American Artists*, 274.

12/ I am thinking here of visual artists and writers. If we consider music, jazz is arguably Bronzeville’s most exported art form, an improvisational vernacular that many scholars would consider a form of modernist abstraction.

13/ I make this argument more completely in *Chicago Renaissance: The Midwest and Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

Acknowledgments

For permission to print reproductions of paintings and historical photographs in this feature, the editors thank the Estate of Eldzier Cortor and the South Side Community Art Center. Images were graciously provided by the Art Institute of Chicago and the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. Special thanks to Arcilla Stahl at the South Side Community Art Center and to Marjorie Van Cura at the Rosenfeld Gallery. Our deep appreciation to Michael Cortor for facilitating the interview with his father.



An exhibition at the South Side Community Art Center, Chicago, 1940s. Left to right: Eldzier Cortor, unidentified, and Peter Pollock. Photograph courtesy of the South Side Community Art Center.

An Interview with Eldzier Cortor

LO: *You've been based in New York for decades now. But maybe you could tell me a little bit about when you were in Chicago.*

EC: There's a difference between the two places, you see. When I was in Chicago you could just come in and knock on the door of somebody's house, but here in New York you have to make an appointment and things like that before you see somebody. In New York, you don't just descend on somebody. In Chicago, all of a sudden, they're a friend—I mean, a *friend* even. In Chicago, you just knock on the door!

Chicago—they were very welcoming. I remember during the War, they had soldiers coming in, and they had what they call the USO. Soldiers could meet and dance with the girls who would be there, and they'd invite the girls home to meet the family and whatnot. And when the GIs came back, they were welcomed. These are guys from farms, farm boys a long way from home, so sometimes they want to take you to meet their parents. The young men in Chicago were like country boys, nothing more, you see. I don't know if it's like that now...

I remember the Newberry Library, where I did a lot of research before I went to St. Helena Island. There was a park nearby; it was called Bughouse Square. And they had dialectics and debating there. It wasn't someone making a public speech but a group of people making different speeches, different arguments here and there. Someone would be debating over here, and someone would be speaking their mind or some theory over there. There would be arguing. And then there would be back-and-forth with the audience. You would think these debaters were homeless, but no, they were the smartest people. This was during the Depression years, you see. They used the library to keep warm, and they were very knowledgeable because they

This interview was conducted in April 2015 at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York. The transcript of the interview has been edited for clarity and thematic continuity.

would read while they sat at the library. The protests they have over here at Union Square—it comes from way back, as a matter of fact, in Chicago. I don't know if Chicago still has anything like that. You know, things get torn down. That's what I fear: who was it that wrote that book, *You Can't Go Home Again*?

They had quite a bit of writers in Chicago. Thornton Wilder was there. Gertrude Stein came and visited the University of Chicago. She had [Alice] Toklas with her, and everyone thought they were scrub-women! Because they were five-four and they didn't have anyone with them. Wilder was a friend of theirs. Even [Jean-Paul] Sartre and Simone [de Beauvoir] came to Chicago.

What do you remember of the artists who were in Chicago from the 1930s through the 1950s?

I remember Motley! Willard Motley. He lived on the West Side, as a matter of fact, I think. And then he moved to the North Side. Because he lived up there, he would always use the Newberry Library. But his brother, Archibald Motley, was on the South Side. They were both such nice guys. Willard worked in a dress factory, where the owner also became interested in art, so Willard could stop once in a while and write down little things. He had a trunk full of notes that I guess he was assembling for his book [*Knock on Any Door* (1947)]. That's how he wrote that. He also wrote something about me and the other artists, like William Carter, that he visited on the South Side. It was an essay about all the arts of the town, for the Urban League's little publication.

So Motley was writing about the artists of Bronzeville. What about Gwendolyn Brooks, did you know her?

Yes, Gwendolyn Brooks had a painting of mine. She was an introvert, more or less. I used to know her husband. He was a mechanic, an automobile mechanic. He fixed up some of the cars I used on my trips. I had a Rosenwald Fellowship and went on a trip to the Georgia Sea Islands to do research. St. Helena Island, that's where I stayed. There was a Penn School there, run by the Quakers. After the Civil War, land was given to the former slaves there, you see. They owned the land—forty acres and a mule, you know. And the Quakers came there

to teach them a trade. And the Penn School—I have a hunch that the place now is like golf courses. But the beautiful beach they had there! No one went there. You’d find ex-Confederate graveyards and things like that. Collapsed mausoleums, all moldy. Everything like that, you see, from another year, from another period. I painted some of that. I sent some to Howard University because I knew a number of the professors there, like Horace Cayton. They bought some drawings and things. That’s what paid my way sometimes, for the trips. Cayton helped me with my fellowship for the Sea Islands.

I asked about Cayton and his family when I was in Chicago this year. There was a whole family—I painted his mother’s portrait, as a matter of fact. I painted his sister’s portrait, too. Cayton eventually went to California. But in Chicago he was in with S. I. Hayakawa at the Parkway Community House. Hayakawa was Japanese-Canadian. A lot of Japanese people came through to Illinois at that time because in California they were being put in internment camps. When they came to Chicago the wealthy ones went where the rich people were, and the poor ones came to the South Side. Hayakawa taught semantics down there. You know what happens: time passes, and.... He became head of the university [San Francisco State University], and he became a reactionary. The students were protesting. Time passes, and another group comes in.

So you knew Horace Cayton and his circle quite well. Did you ever cross paths with Richard Wright?

I read *Native Son* when it was published. A lot of my people didn’t care for Wright’s book because he hit on certain things, you see, that people didn’t want to hear. That painting in Chicago, with the people in the bed [*The Room No. VI* (1948), p. 124]—I probably didn’t get that *from* Wright’s book, but there’s a chapter where the fellow [Bigger Thomas] is on the run, and he’s going down the alley, and he sees the couple in bed with the family. There’s a child with them. It was a common thing—a family in one room. I remembered that from the novel. And that’s what I know the painting by, how I know it’s in Chicago.

Wright was very left-wing, but later on he changed. He went to Paris and became interested in the existentialists. He knew Sartre and de Beauvoir. I met both of them in Haiti. I was there with Harlan

Jackson, and I used to teach at the Centre d'Art. Sartre and de Beauvoir happened to be there on a weekend. I photographed Sartre with Jackson. I had remembered seeing a play of Sartre's at the University of Chicago, where my wife Sophie used to work. It was at a little theater there.

Speaking of Wright's politics, were you involved at all in the Leftist politics in the 40s?

Everybody was. Everybody was slightly pink in the Depression days. I was an artist on the WPA [Works Progress Administration] in my early twenties; I was twenty-one or twenty-two. My supervisor on the Project was Norman MacLeish. Remember, his brother was the Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish. I was a youngster on the Project, but most of the artists were older. Ivan Albright was on there. It was Florence Arquin who ran the Federal Arts Project in Illinois. She was always driving Albright nuts. He painted too slow. And she would point to the painting and say, "The clouds—there are too many phallic symbols in those clouds there." [*Laughing.*] She would drive him nuts.

What was your relationship to the South Side Community Art Center? Did you know Margaret Burroughs?

I knew Margaret Burroughs. There's still a bust of her at the South Side Community Art Center. It's so funny how that place just grew. You can't say one person started it. It's ended up in many people's hands. One person leaves, and it's turned over to another person. Now when I'm there I look at the board [of directors], and I say, "Where is Horace Cayton?" Or "Where is Marion Perkins?" I'm meeting people, and someone will say, "Oh, I'm Perkins's grandson." *That's* the person I'm meeting. I don't meet the *son* of Perkins, I meet the *grandson*.

I was telling them at the Art Center about a fashion show they would have, called the Artists and Models Ball. I would say it was an attraction for the black debutantes. Something your daughter would go and see. When I was there they did a little fundraising with it.

There was a fellow at the Art Center by the name of Peter Pollock. They don't think of him much there, but they owe so much to him. He was a real terrific guy. He worked for the Art Center, and then he worked for the WPA, and he was like the legman for getting this person here

and putting this person there, getting the carpenters there and things like that. Then he went to New York and worked at the Metropolitan Museum. Lots of those people came from Chicago, went to New York.

I have a photograph of you in Chicago sitting in a huge chair. Was this taken at the South Side Community Art Center?

Wayne Miller took that picture. That was my apartment. My studio. It's a Victorian chair. On Perry Avenue in Chicago is where you had a lot of wealthy people. A lot of the meatpackers lived there—Oscar Mayer, the Armours, the Swifts—because the stockyards were near there. They used to have those Victorian mansions. Across the street from the Art Center, too, they had some. Madame [Ernestine] Schumann-Heink, an opera singer at the time, had a mansion like that. When the Depression hit, that's when it started happening—breaking up those places. It was a whole different atmosphere then, you see, and those people weren't anywhere around anymore. So the mansions became rooming houses and things like that. I don't know if they've torn them down, or if they still have them there. So this chair was in the Salvation Army. It was salvage, second-hand. The modern rooms were small, so the Victorian furniture came out of the homes.



Photomontage of models' portraits, 1949 Artists and Models Ball catalog. Courtesy of the South Side Community Art Center.

I wanted to ask you a question about a picture. I'm going to show it to you: It's one that you gave to the Art Center last fall. It's called Trilogy No. II, Verso.

I have another *Trilogy*, too. I studied and then taught printmaking at Pratt Institute [1972–1995]. When I was at Pratt, I was in my woodcut phase. We had been in Paris visiting Stanley Hayter at his place Atelier Dix-Sept, and they turned us on to a place [in New York] called the Printmaking Workshop, the Bob [Robert] Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. Everyone that was into printmaking would end up there, unless they got a press and opened up a print shop of their own. I wasn't very commercial with the prints. I didn't sell that many, so I'd only print up fifteen or twenty. But I'd never put down the number I printed on there. I figured, if they start selling I'll just print more.

You'll notice that some of my paintings have a little chop at the bottom in Japanese. Well, that's a Japanese print. It's just made with watercolor tones, you see. I knew a Japanese fellow in New York, [Jun'ichiro] Sekino; he gave me that chop. He wrote my name out in that little Japanese print. He used to correspond with me from Japan. We used to send Christmas cards to one another over the years.

Is your work—is what you're doing—related to abstraction? I think your work sometimes appeals to people who like abstract art.

No, I wasn't abstract, you see. Even from the beginning I knew that. When I was a student at the Art Institute [of Chicago], we had a whole array. In the "History of the Arts" course, they took us through the *whole thing*. And when I was coming along later on the WPA, we had different types of artists. When I did those things, like going to the Sea Islands and places like that, abstract art didn't do anything down there. They did pulp things: *the people* and things like that, you know, was the material.

I knew what they were doing with abstraction. I went to the Institute of Design, as a matter of fact, and I could understand why they didn't want you to know perspective. If you were caught with a knowledge of perspective and color schemes.... They didn't want you to be knowledgeable. The point was to make you modern. As long as you learned some terms. That's what the Bauhaus was; it was terms. They were against breaking laws, you see. You learned a language. And the art



Eldzier Cortor, *Trilogy No. II, Verso* (undated), etching and aquatint on paper. Image © Estate of Eldzier Cortor. Photograph courtesy of Liesl Olson.

was like that, too. It's just words, if you notice; that's what these things are. Tom Wolfe wrote a book called *The Painted Word*. Jackson Pollock was really nothing, you see. It's just words! I think that was a mistake.

You mentioned the Bauhaus. Sarah Kelly Oehler, a curator at the Art Institute, told me that you had met some of the New Bauhaus artists when they were in Chicago.

I went to school there with [László] Moholy-Nagy. Prairie Avenue was at a distance from it. The Bauhaus, the Institute of Design—that became part of another school.

Right, it's the Illinois Institute of Technology.

I think [Serge] Chermayeff, the architect, took it and went to another institution. And it became the Illinois Institute. It surprises me that the art department is still there. They didn't want you to have an art education. They did a lot of things that were functional. You'd understand why these buildings were here and other buildings were there. When you entered that school they just wanted you to be modern. Well—it was a welcoming place. "Glad to see you!" at the door. I told you about that knock at the door. The Bauhaus was next to the Chez Paree. That was a nightclub. I don't know if it's still around.

Now, can you tell me about your experience as a student at the Art Institute?

The knowledge that they gave you at the Art Institute really filled me in. The education there was very fulfilling. If I was traveling in Europe and I was standing on the street there in certain places, I knew that this was where the king had his head chopped off or something like that. You could pass by Victor Hugo's house. You knew you were right at the spot where something probably happened. You wouldn't need a book to refer to. You would know from your art background, you see.

The history of art course covered the whole thing. I have the book, *Art through the Ages* [1926], by Helen Gardner. Kathleen Blackshear did the illustrations in the book. That's like a Bible there, *Art through the Ages*. My "History of the Arts" pages—the teachers [Gardner and Blackshear] wanted you to use their book, you see, but I couldn't get

a hold of the book at the library there—so I just wrote up my own investigation of things. I used to write them out like a composition, then turn in the pages. They put them up in the hallway sometimes.

And they took us over to the Field Museum to see African sculpture and all types of things there. You know, the Field Museum was fabulous. The showcases were old-fashioned; it used to be handwritten cards at the bottom of different displays. So if you're in Chicago and you go to the Field Museum, then you know those Greek columns that are women with baskets on their heads—that's called a certain kind of column. And then if you're in Athens or Mykonos or somewhere in Greece you know what kind of columns the different columns are. I was once in Egypt.... You have to start from there to go to Greece, you see. I went to see the sculptures of women, the heads. And I went to see the pyramids, too. Because that was the history of art.

Tell me more about your travels. When you were in Haiti, were you painting and teaching?

Oh yeah, at the Centre d'Art there. They loved me in Haiti! They took me in. They gave me a job—first time I had an income. I would take the people up in the hills and hold class there; we'd set up an easel. You know, France has a pull on Haiti just like we have. That's regional down there: Haiti, Cuba, and Jamaica. And that's why I went. It's very French. People speak the patois, and the bourgeoisie, they speak Parisian French. I learned the patois myself. I stopped off in Cuba first, then Jamaica. I just blew through Jamaica; I was more like a tourist there. I spent more time in Cuba—you know, Fidel Castro.... And in Haiti, they had the Centre d'Art, and they also had these so-called folk artists there. That was another group. You know how we have a Horace Pippin type of painting? Some of their artists had been to France, and the painters weren't painting like the realistic Haitian painters. They were doing voodoo types of things because they were selling to people like Charles Laughton and different movie stars that would go down there and buy these little folk paintings.

I liked them, and they liked me. I had a visa. I could have stayed the rest of my life there. A lot of people there were in and out. Like in Mexico. They give you so many weeks or months to stay there, then they put you out of there, across the border. But I could have stayed there the rest of my life.

I wouldn't go back there now because it's so violent. I have that woodcut, *L'Abattoire* [1955]. Writers have said that was during the [François] Duvalier period. They say, well, there was that slaughterhouse. No, Duvalier wasn't there when I was there! You know, he fled to France, and then he came back. That slaughterhouse—that was just a drome, a French iron building. Like a stockyard. One day me and this fellow artist went down there to the big drome. And did it smell—you know, it was like the one they had in Chicago.

Did Katherine Dunham go to Haiti, too?

Yeah, she came after I was there. She tried to be like a Doctor [Albert] Schweitzer down there. I don't know how she got into that because she was really a dancer...

And she was an anthropology student at the University of Chicago...

...and an anthropologist. She lived at Pauline's Bath. Napoleon's sister had a bath down there. It was a big complex: There was a house, a plaza—like a villa, almost. Trees and a pool—a big pool, like a swimming pool. And they called it Pauline's Bath.

Speaking of the University of Chicago, did you ever go to any exhibits at the Renaissance Society?

I exhibited there. I had a painting there, *Southern Gate* [1942–1943], that's at the Smithsonian now. It's the main painting of mine at the Smithsonian. I don't remember the director who chose my work at the Renaissance Society. You know what, the University of Chicago didn't want too much publicity. I don't think they even put the exhibit in the paper. They didn't want their gallery to be too much of a public gallery. They wanted it to be for students. You would just walk in. It was like the Gates of Ishtar at the Oriental Institute: you would just walk in.

I remember they had a gate there [Cobb Gate] at the University of Chicago. I don't remember if it's still there. Bert [Robert Maynard] Hutchins was the president. He closed down football! He said the only exercise he got was in the spring. Anyway, they had this big gate: It was animals on both sides and in the center. They were different animals,

from a weasel on up to a lion. They went all the way up to the top. And they were fighting, snapping. This one was trying to keep that other one back. What do you call that? A pecking order. And at the top was the lion.

My wife Sophie worked at the University of Chicago, at the law school, just as a stenographer. She taught at the Art Institute for a while. She was a dancer with Anne Rudolph downtown. They had a Martha Graham kind of dance. It was also like Isadora Duncan. They broke with the ballet. The dancers could be plump and different shapes but fit in, you see. They weren't into the ballet.

When did you move to New York?

I was in New York several times before I moved there. I used to take a bus from Chicago—the thirteen-dollar bus—and after a while I would stop off at Washington, too, and sometimes I would sell a picture. The reason I was in New York is because they had galleries, you see, and it was more professional, the galleries. There was the Associated Artists Gallery on 57th Street. They started selling prints—affordable prints. That was the early days of Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and people like that. I was in that gallery, too, and sold through them. That was in my early twenties. Peggy Guggenheim also had a gallery there on 57th Street. The Art of This Century, it was called.

It's marketing with New York. They package it here. The artists in New York were all fragmented: some lived in Brooklyn, and some lived in Manhattan. But New York is able to merchandize everything. In Chicago it's free; it's just free. It's not packaged in Chicago.

Did you know Ralph Ellison in New York?

Yes. He came to visit me once. I knew his wife, Fanny Ellison. She bought a painting of mine. A flood scene [*Southern Landscape (Southern Flood)* (1944–1945)]. They have it in the collection at the Brooklyn Museum.

Ellison came down and visited me. I lived down on Cherry Street, on the Lower East Side. It was a naval yard, and I came there during the war. People were moving the heck out of the neighborhood, so half the building was empty at that time. I got an apartment for fifteen dollars a month, and after a while I began to tell all the other artists,

and a lot of them began to move there. I remember a woman, a player on Broadway; she was in *Lysistrata* when it came in from Chicago, and she got an apartment in the building. Different people like that. The building became an artists' place. 466 Cherry Street.

Ellison lived up by Riverside Drive, and I knew why he wanted to live up by Columbia. He could schmooze with people. I was in with a sculptor by the name of Jason Seely, and he said Ellison liked to schmooze with the professors. That was his world. He didn't want to be down there with the fishmongers like I was.

I never read *Invisible Man*, but I remember the advertisement.¹ It shows a sewer with a hand below it. I knew the fellow in the photos. Fellow's name was [John] Bates, a muscular guy. He was a bouncer for the Savoy Ballroom. He liked artists. He was interracially married, so he came down to Haiti to live, and that's how I struck up with him. Then he came to New York.

I went to Columbia. I still lived downtown, and I'd always end up going to Brooklyn by mistake. I knew Ralph Mayer and Hans Mueller. Mayer was into the chemistry of paintings. Mueller was woodcuts. And I remember the impressive statue at Columbia, the Alma Mater statue. I loved that kind of classical sculpture because I had traveled in Greece.

During that early period in New York, who were the artists that you were really attracted to? What kind of work did you like to see?

I used to like to go to the Museum of Modern Art to see the Peter Blume, the Mussolini head [*The Eternal City*, 1937]. Sort of surreal. And the [Pavel] Tchelitchew, the tree of life [*Hide and Seek*, 1942]. It's a tree with little children around it. I don't know if they put those things away or what. The Museum of Modern Art, they've changed their whole look now. You know, as I say, it's funny how time goes by. It's like going back home. You know, they've torn down things, and it's not the same. So maybe it's best to keep your memories, you see. Like I'm sitting here talking to you.

1/ The "advertisement" for *Invisible Man* is Gordon Parks's photo-essay in *Life* magazine (25 August 1952) depicting scenes from the novel. John Bates, an amateur boxer in New York, was the model for the invisible man in Parks's photos.