

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

This is Who We Are: David Antonio Cruz

By Carlos Barragán
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David Antonio Cruz, 'home, is where i want to be,' detail (48 x 60 in, oil and latex on wood panel, 2023).
Courtesy of the artist and Galleria Poggiali

*This Is Who We Are is a series featuring Columbia School of the Arts' professors, covering careers, pedagogy, and art-making. Here, we talk with Assistant Professor of Visual Arts **David Antonio Cruz** about the artist's greater responsibility, why the university should be a place for productive failure, and why it is important to fall in love with your obsessions.*

On November 20, 2022, a 22-year-old gunman entered Club Q, an LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs, and opened fire, killing five people and injuring 25 others—one of the latest attacks in a long string of shootings targeting the LGBTQ community. Two days later, when I asked Professor David Antonio Cruz about the original forces that propelled his career as an artist, he turned to these tragic events to explain why it is still fundamental to examine the violence against queer, trans, and gender-fluid communities.

“It reminded me of the reasons at the core of what I do. Until society wakes up, I feel there's always space for me to question what's happening in this world,” he told me. “It is impossible to let those forces go. I'm still trying to understand myself and my place as a queer or Latin person. The core is always there. That artistic silence is never too far away.”

David Antonio Cruz, born to Puerto Rican parents in Philadelphia, is an interdisciplinary artist focused on drawing, painting, and performance. In his work, Cruz explores the visibility and intersectionality of brown, black, and queer bodies, the lives of those divided between two different homelands, and the psychological tensions behind them. His paintings have been exhibited at El Museo del Barrio, ICA Boston, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, and Brooklyn Museum and he has been awarded several fellowships.

Raised in a traditional Puerto Rican home, Cruz didn't like to play outside. Instead, he preferred spending time drawing and painting. "I was drawn to the idea of creating worlds to understand how I could be a part of things that I didn't feel connected to," he said. "It is such an intimate and personal thing. It was a natural way for me to lean into it from a young age and have those private conversations with myself. This is the thing I've always been obsessed with."

Cruz received his BFA in Painting from Pratt Institute and his MFA from Yale University. For Cruz, education was a way to expand and try new ideas, even if that meant challenging his own. "It was a place for failure. Failure not in the sense of giving up but of trying things that don't work. You strip everything down and walk into a space completely surrendering to new ideas," he said. "It allowed me to become the person that I am now. Being in an uncomfortable situation allowed me to expand and grow."



David Antonio Cruz, 'canyoustaywithmetonight_causeyouarehere,youarehere,andweareherewithyou,' (72 x 96 in, Oil and latex on wood panel, 2021). Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

In his first years as an artist, Cruz expanded his interests to include other mediums. He started writing and thinking about other disciplines, from sculpture to performance. Since then, he's been constantly adapting to ensure that the queer perspective—his perspective—doesn't get left out.

I've always wanted to ask an interdisciplinary artist how their process works when they start from scratch, so I asked Cruz: how do you decide which genre is best for conveying an idea?

"They don't like each other," he said, laughing. "I do find that certain things can be said easier one way or another, but it comes down to my own personal impulse. It's a very emotional decision. Performance is a public thing. There's an interaction that happens between me and the audience. A painting on the wall becomes a beautiful interaction between the object itself and the viewer. The intimacy is very different, but the vibe is the same. I think of them as the A-side and B-side of a vinyl: performance on one side of my work, painting on the other. They're different, but they exist in the same space. They influence each other, they live within the same space, they breathe the same air, and have the same colors."

In his paintings *I cut from the middle to get a better slice*, Cruz explored the notion of a 'chosen family' and how the nonbiological bonds between queer people are established through love and support. Each painting, according to Cruz, depicts the likeness of the artist's own community, and at the same time, the portraits strive to capture much more than the physical representation of the figures; they venerate the overall structure of queer relationships, captured through intimate moments of touch, strength, support, and celebration. His opera-like performances, he told me, are a manifestation of the same message through a different vessel. The performers are usually the models for the paintings. Cruz's work borrows from queer plays and films to show already forgotten queer history and explore the physical and emotional distance between the body, society and history.

"Art is a marker of time, and it's one of the most beautiful ways to talk about history. It's impossible to divorce what is being made artistically to what is happening in the world," he told me. "We do have a responsibility to see. We are responsible for creating something that will speak to the future, so people will understand how we got there." "I tell my students that we think we are looking for definite answers. Facts. But I prefer that, instead, we keep looking for endless questions."

In a conversation with the artist Jason Elizondo, Cruz explained how he decided to choose and fully embrace himself. "It's what I call the celebration of life, of being," he said in *The Brooklyn Rail*. "Living in the moment and full of life. I treasure that. I had a choice to live my authentic self or for someone else a long time ago. I needed to live truthfully—so I chose me.". When I asked him about this passage, Cruz blushed. Visibly moved, he said:

"Life is cyclical. You have to hit a wall and struggle to understand that, as an artist, you have to make certain decisions to live in truth and survive, which is the hardest thing to ask of someone at a young age," he told me. "When you grow up in a different community, you try to understand where you fit in that world. When people tell you how masculinity is supposed to be... I had to break with all of those things. It took me years to understand the power I had within myself."

By the end of the conversation, I asked him what lesson he would like his students to learn from him. "By the time they leave class, I hope my students have fallen in love and become obsessed with something. I hope they get to a place where they have more questions. I want my students to love the journey and discover a new truth. There are multiple ways of seeing the world. There are multiple ways of experiencing things. There are multiple ways of creating and sharing," he told me.

Cruz demands curiosity from his students, acknowledging that two people might experience the world differently, even if they start from the same point of departure. He started to talk quickly, as though a thought had suddenly struck him. "The hardest thing for an artist is understanding the meaning of their work. It is very underestimated. I tell my students that we think we are looking for definite answers. Facts. But I prefer that, instead, we keep looking for endless questions."

David Antonio Cruz is an interdisciplinary artist exploring the intersectionality of queerness and race, centering Black, Brown, and queer bodies to explore the personal and collective history and culture. Incorporating literature, language, and sculptural elements, his work engages portraiture as a place of permanence and as a form of resistance to normative conventions. Cruz received his BFA in Painting from Pratt Institute and his MFA from Yale University. He also attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and completed the AIM Program at the Bronx Museum. Recent residencies and fellowships include the LMCC Workspace Residency, Project for Empty Space Artist in Residence Program, BRIC Workspace Residency, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Award, Franklin Furnace, and the Mass Cultural Council's Artist Fellowship. His work has been exhibited throughout the United States and internationally, including at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Brooklyn Museum, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, ICA Boston, The Block Museum of Art, McNay Art Museum, and El Museo del Barrio. Upcoming projects include a solo exhibition at ICA Philadelphia this fall.